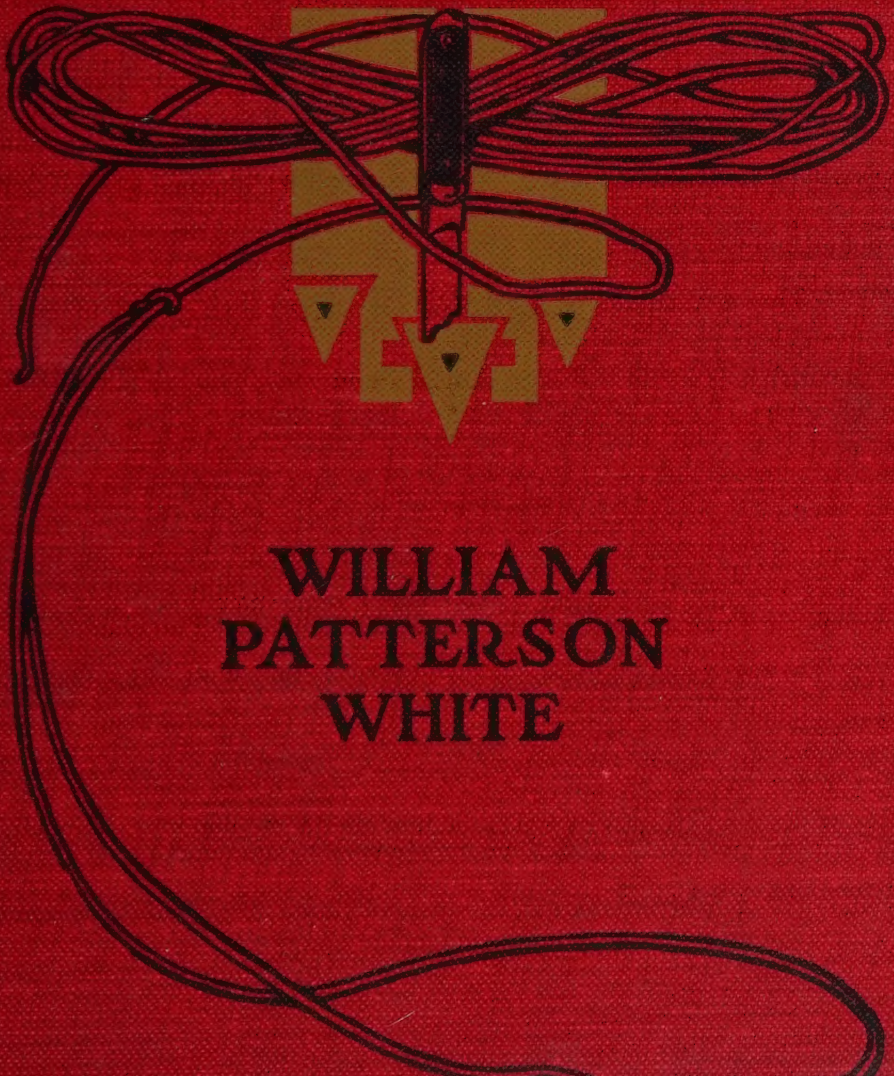
LYNCH LAWYERS



WILLIAM PATTERSON WHITE

LYNCH LAWYERS

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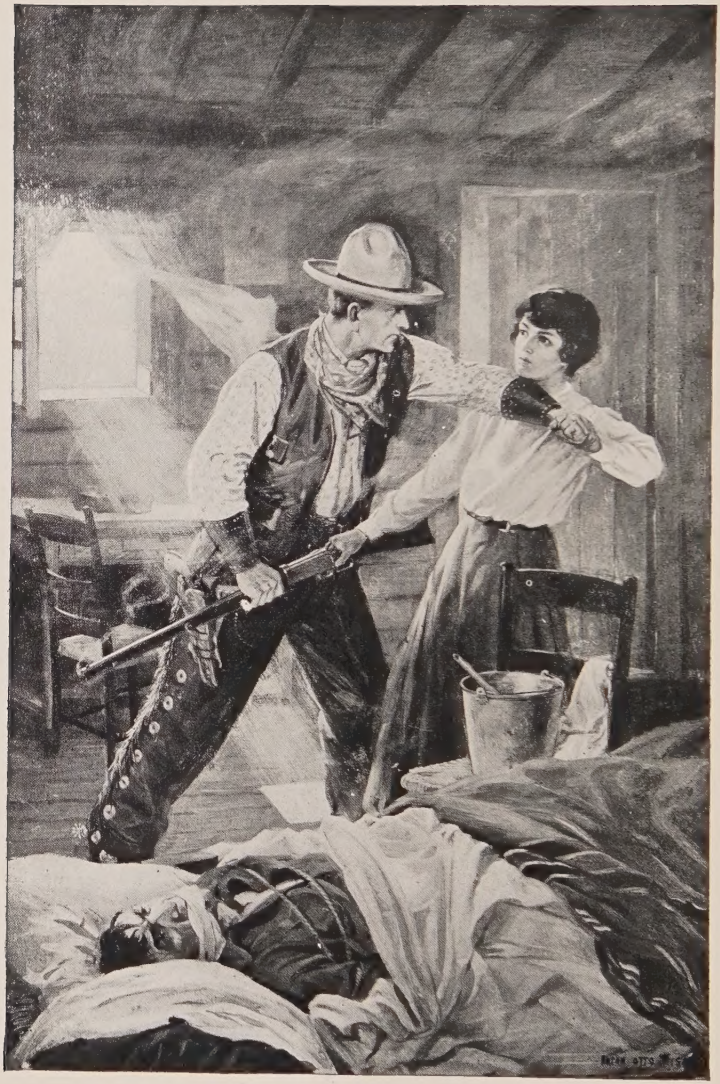

Half deafened and coughing in the smoke, Red Kane wrenched the Winchester from the hands of Dot Lorimer. FRONTISPIECE.

See page 118.

LYNCH LAWYERS

By
WILLIAM PATTERSON WHITE

WITH FRONTISPIECE BY
ANTON OTTO FISCHER

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TO MY COUSIN

LAURA ELLMAKER WALLER

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LYNCH LAWYERS

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CHAPTER ONE

RED KANE'S BOREDOM

"WHY," mourned "Red" Kane, "why don't somethin' ever happen?"

"Knock wood quick," urged "Kansas" Casey, the deputy sheriff, "or somethin'll happen to you maybe."

"Huh!" snorted Red Kane the skeptic, "I wouldn't mind. Anythin' for a change. A earthquake, or, if you'd have a fit even, it'd help. I ain't particular. Djever have fits, Kansas?" he added hopefully.

"Shore I never," denied the indignant Kansas. "You talk like I was a cat or somethin'."

"Yuh might be somethin' lots worse. Cats! Why, Kansas, cats is real people an' wide between the eyes. I dunno but what cats is most as sensible as mules."

"Well, I ain't no cat, an' don't you forget it!" Casey's grin belied his tone.

"Alla same, I wish somethin'd happen." Red Kane was not losing sight of the main issue.

"Why don't yuh get drunk?" suggested Kansas.

"Don't wanna get drunk. Dunno why, neither. 'Sfunny."

"Must 'a' got religion like Tommy Mull up at Cutter. But Tommy jumped in again with a splash that near drownded him, an' so will you. They all do."

"I guess. I'm only a poor weak vessel full o' sin an'

the devil's works like I heard a helldodger say once at camp-meetin' when I was a kid back East in Arkansaw. Scared me green, them words did, till my pap told me how that was only the preacher's way o' callin' me a human being. Lordy, I wish I was back in Tom's Landing. There'd be a dog fight or a steamboat takin' on freight or somethin'. An' a swim! A feller could take a swim, a real shore-nough swim in twenty foot o' water. Twenty foot o' *cool* water, Kansas."

"Shut up!" begged the deputy. "The sweat's runnin' down the back o' my neck; that thermometer out front says ninety-five in the shade, an' they ain't no swimmin' water inside o' fifteen mile. A swim!"

"Yessir, a swim," persisted Red Kane, his eyes shining at the memory, "an' a float while yuh go driftin' down the current with the afternoon sun a-slantin' down, an' the Mississippi shore all blue an' hazy way off yonder, an' no sound but the water lappin' when yuh wiggle yore toes or maybe a steamboat whistle now an' then. Wouldn't that make yuh chew cotton, huh? I'm askin' yuh, wouldn't it?"

"Shut up, I'm tellin' yuh. She's only one o'clock, an' gettin' hotter by the minute."

"All of which ain't got a thing to do with Farewell's bein' dead an' buried. I might's well stayed at the ranch an' let the 'Kid's Twin' come. He wanted to, an', 'cause he wanted to, I wanted to — like a fool — an' we matched a dollar, an' I won — I mean I lost."

Red Kane listlessly pulled the makings from a vest pocket and constructed a cigarette without haste and with a great deal of care.

The two men were sitting in the shade of the wide eaves of Dolan's warehouse. Through the open window of the dance-hall next door they could hear the voices of the bartender and one of the girls uplifted in a dreary wrangling.

"If it wasn't so hot, I'd bend this bottle over yore head!" the girl declared plaintively.

The bartender mumbled something. The girl came to the doorway and stood looking out into the street. Within the hotel corral a mule brayed a bray without spirit, a bray that broke off in the middle.

"Gawd," murmured the girl, slatting the sweat from her forehead with plump fingers, "it's too hot even for the mule."

She stared heavily at Casey and Kane, achieved a bovine wink and withdrew, her slippers slipslopping across the dance-hall floor.

"She shore feels the heat, too," chuckled Kansas Casey.

Kane nodded and inhaled deeply. He was hot and becoming hotter. Nevertheless, his desire for action of some sort remained acute. Which desire was destined to be divertingly gratified much sooner than he expected.

The northbound stage, pulling in with mail, two passengers and the Wells Fargo box, broke the front axle directly opposite the Canton Restaurant. The Wells Fargo guard and the driver shot from the seat and sprawled upon the horses. The wretched passengers smote the interior of the coach with noses and knees. At the slithering impact of the guard's and driver's bodies upon their skittish backs the horses ran away.

The guard fell between the wheels and came out, barked and bruised but otherwise undamaged, under the rear axle. The driver, hanging to his reins, straddled the pole and strove to regain control of his tearing team. The customers of the Happy Heart saloon rushed out to see the fun. Then they rushed in again with equal promptitude and gained safety a short jump ahead of the careering stage, which mounted the sidewalk and fairly clipped the saloon's doorsill. All the cow-ponies attached to the hitching-rail ran away, and in all directions, too.

Mrs. Jackson, a nervous person, in sticking her head out of her kitchen window, knocked away the supporting stick and was held in the position of a guillotined victim of the French Revolution by the descending sash. The unhappy lady at once began to scream like a lost soul, for the window had jammed and she could not release herself.

The stage and its horses poured through Mrs. Jackson's tiny truck garden, upset the wash-bench and two tubs of water, swung around the house and back into the street, where the stage struck the Bar S buckboard and smashed the buckboard's hind wheels to splinters. Here the stage was joined by at least twenty-four dogs, which proceeded to further enliven the frantic horses by furious barking and sundry nips judiciously delivered. All this in the midst of a swirling fog of golden dust.

At the crash of the collision with the buckboard the stage's two passengers contrived to open a door and jump. The stage was making excellent time at the moment. The two passengers came to earth in a tangle, rolled over and over in their own little dust cloud and brought up against a snapped post.

The runaways had not lost their enthusiasm. Leaving the remains of the buckboard, they wheeled and bore straight down the middle of the street till the stage locked wheels with a freight wagon. The freight wagon was strongly built and it stood up under the shock. So did not the stage. The king-pin snapped, the body of the stage parted company with the front axle, and the six horses, freed of all encumbrance save their harness and the pole, got into racing stride in a breath.

At the edge of the town they were halted by a quick-witted puncher who whirled his rope, forefooted a leader and piled up the whole outfit in a heap. Incidentally, the driver, who had stuck to his duty to the last, almost had his brains dashed out by the madly flickering heels before he could crawl clear.

The driver, "Whisky Jim", sat up and swore with great feeling. The Wells Fargo guard limped up and rescued the express box. The puncher freed his rope and coiled it. Willing spectators held the horses.

Red Kane and Kansas Casey had not moved during all this tumult and uproar. Now Casey drew a long breath.

"There," said the deputy, "just see what yuh done, wishin' for excitement: them drunkards in the Happy Heart nigh lost a year's growth, the stage almost naturally ruined, an' Mis' Jackson like to choke — if Piney don't get that window up. There, he's got it up. An' yore buckboard looks 's if it's gone shy a wheel or somethin'."

"She's gone shy two wheels an' the whole hind end," supplemented Red Kane, his gray eyes glistening, his tone manifesting less sorrow than it might have, "an' 'Old Salt' will just about go crazy. Won't he rare an' tear? Oh, no, he won't. He'll sue the stage company, that's what he will. Lucky them mules was in gettin' shod. Now I gotta stay here till Piney can mend the buckboard. Maybe somethin' else'll happen. C'mon, Kansas, le's irrigate. I'm a heap livened up now."

On their way to the saloon they saw the guard and Buck Saylor, the Wells Fargo agent, carrying the express box into the company's office.

CHAPTER TWO

THE MORNING AFTER

Red Kane rose early in the morning. He wished to see Mr. Piney Jackson, the town blacksmith, start to work on the buckboard. Not that Jackson was an unwilling worker, but, like many another man of his kind, Piney labored the better for being watched.

Red Kane, stretching and yawning in the street in front of Bill Lainey's hotel, chanced to glance past the front of the Starlight Saloon and catch a glimpse of the side door of the express office. It was a brief glimpse, but it showed him that the door was open. Within the office part of a booted leg and foot, heel on the floor and toes up, was visible. Was that a bandage round the ankle? Was it?

Red Kane diagonally crossed the sidewalk in the direction of the express office. He hurried. Scuffling in at the door he found that what he had taken for a bandage was a rope and that it tied together the ankles of "Buck" Saylor, the express agent. More of that same rope was passed round Saylor's wrists, and there was still enough left to go twice between Saylor's open jaws, encircle his head and finish up in a neat, tight knot beneath Saylor's occipital bone. The agent's eyes batted and rolled. He made queer noises in his throat.

"Lordy!" exclaimed Red Kane and dropped on his knees and pushed the blade of his clasp-knife in between Saylor's bound wrists.

When Saylor was free, he sat up jerkily and spoke

after the manner of one who has a hot potato in his mouth, for his jaws were very raw and sore.

"They got the safe an' the express box!" were the agent's first words.

Red Kane looked sidewise. The company safe was not in its accustomed corner. Nor was the box from the wrecked stage visible. Red Kane nodded and sat down comfortably on the edge of the agent's cot.

"Yeah," said Red Kane, "g'on."

"My Gawd!" moaned Buck Saylor, holding his head in his hands and weaving his body to and fro. "My Gawd! Fifty thousand dollars in cash!"

"Huh!" Red Kane's sagging backbone straightened with a snap.

"Fifty thousand in gold," reiterated the mishandled agent. "Forty thousand in the box for the new bank in the Bend an' ten thousand consigned to Lanpher o' the 88!"

"Insured?" asked Red Kane.

The agent shook his head.

"Ha! Ha!" barked the puncher sardonically. "Lanpher will shore lose his mind! He don't care no more for sixbits than he does for his right eye!" He broke off, perceiving that the agent failed to grasp the point of the joke. "Fifty thousand, Buck," he went on as soothingly as possible; "that's a fright, shore. What yuh gonna do about it?"

"They took the safe!" repeated the agent. "They took the safe!"

Then and not till then did Red Kane realize the true inwardness of the agent's remark. For the Wells Fargo safe weighed a good fifteen hundred pounds. The removal of the safe was a deal more astonishing than the robbery. Kane's eyes widened.

"She's a wonder they didn't take the whole office while they was about it. Where was you?"

"Right here. Where'd yuh guess I'd be? Say —" Here the agent's somewhat scattered wits returned to the fold — "we gotta get after 'em. I gotta roust out Kansas. I wish Jake was here."

"I'll get Kansas," said Red Kane, and he departed on the run.

He returned breathless in five minutes with the deputy. The agent demanded that the robbers be pursued forthwith.

"Plenty o' time," countered Kansas. "If they was bright enough to hop in an' hop out with a safe weighin' as much as two ponies, they're bright enough not to hang around where we can pounce down on 'em. Tell me all of it, Buck. Then maybe we'll know where we stand. Didn't yuh hear nobody breakin' in? You didn't let 'em in, did yuh?"

"Let 'em in? Of course I didn't let 'em in! What yuh guess? But it was so hot I left the side door open. My dogs was out exercisin' round, an' I was a-settin' here on my bed waitin' for 'em to come in, an' I guess I must 'a' drowsed off."

"I guess maybe," put in Kansas. "What next?"

"Next I was bein' tied like Red found me. I thrashed round, but they had me tight. I couldn't do nothin'. Couldn't even squeak. They had the rope in my mouth first thing, o' course. An' everythin' was done in the dark."

"How many was they? Yuh must have some li'l idea, even if yuh couldn't see nothin'."

"Three — four men maybe. I ain't shore. Seems like they was a dozen, but o' course they couldn't have been so many."

"Did they say anythin'?"

"Nothin' I could hear 'cept once. They mostly muttered low. I didn't know their voices."

"What did they say that once?"

" 'Here's a express box,' says one. 'Take it along,' says another. 'They's maybe somethin' in it.' "

" They didn't know about that shipment o' forty thousand to the Bend," declared Kansas Casey. " Lanpher's money was all they knowed about, an' that extra forty was pure velvet. You couldn't swear to neither o' them voices, Buck, huh? Shore?"

" Shore. I'd never heard 'em before."

" Three men anyway, yuh say?"

" Yep. Now, for Gawd's sake, Kansas, do somethin', will yuh? Yuh've heard all I can tell yuh, an' — "

" Yeah, I'm paid to do somethin'," interrupted Kansas, staring levelly at Buck Saylor. " I'll do my job, don't yuh fret. Habit I got. Le's go out an' see how they got the safe away."

By the marks on the earth without it was evident that the midnight marauders had eased the safe along by tipping it end over end.

" She must 'a' made a jounce each time she dropped," observed Red Kane.

" She didn't make much of a noise," said the agent. " Leastwise all I could hear was li'l bumps like."

" You must be gettin' deef," Kansas assured him.

Behind the corrals, where the marks of crowbars and bootheels ended in a maze of tracks and scars and gouges, the express agent managed to vindicate his maligned sense of hearing.

" There," he announced, excitedly pointing his finger, " look at that mattress! That's why I didn't hear much. They dropped her on that mattress each time. I told yuh they was a heap silent."

" A heap silent!" cried Kansas Casey scornfully, pointing to the wheeltracks of a freight wagon. " A heap silent! Look at them wagontracks! Why, they musta made noise enough to wake Julius Caesar. I'm surprised the town's still here. Dunno why they didn't

take you too, Buck. Yore head would make 'em a good paperweight."

"How could I know what was gonna happen?" protested the indignant Buck Saylor. "My dogs wasn't around."

Came then Tom Kane, Red Kane's brother and a citizen of Farewell engaged in the freighting business. Tom Kane was manifestly perturbed to a degree.

"My wagon's gone!" he declared. "Likewise the marshal's pet ridin' hoss an' a team o' my mules. What you laughin' at?" he added angrily to his brother.

"You," grinned Red, "an' them midnight magruders. Which they are shore the most enterprisin' active gents I ever have the luck to hear tell of. Yessir."

"Yo're a fool!" snapped Tom Kane in proper brotherly fashion.

"Well, anyway, I got sense enough to hang onto what's mine," returned Red Kane.

"Yeah," said Tom unpleasantly, "yeah. If yo're so able to hang onto what's yores, where's yore team o' mules gone?"

"What!" cried Red. "Ain't they in the corral with yore other teams?"

"They ain't, y'bet yuh. Only my other teams' there. Yore mules is vanished plumb away. Yore li'l black hoss is missin', too."

Tom Kane smacked his lips with relish as he gazed at his brother. Red began to swear. He heatedly cursed the robbers and their immediate ancestors as he hitched up his chaps and started off in the direction of his brother's corral.

"I'm gonna borrow one o' yore hosses," he flung back over his shoulder.

"Help yoreself," Tom called after him. "Take Jack Owens' saddle. She's hangin' inside the front door."

"Guess we've done learned all we need here," said the

methodical Kansas. "Might as well scare up a posse now an' do a li'l trailin'."

They had no need to scare up a posse. Every Farewell citizen, on hearing the news, reached for his Winchester, scooped up saddle and bridle and headed for his horse.

Within fifteen minutes Kansas Casey was riding the wagon-track trail. With him galloped the two Kanes, Buck Saylor and twenty other men. Other of Farewell's inhabitants, slower in the uptake, followed by twos and threes.

They followed the tracks eastward a distance of more than five miles. Riding through a draw, they came suddenly upon the freight wagon, its pole propped and tidily harness-hung, standing between two tall spruce trees. Beyond the wagon, where the draw, widening round a spring, formed a basin filled with lush grass, grazed four hobbled mules. Of the marshal's pet riding horse and Red Kane's black pony there were no signs.

"They shore was thoughtful devils," Red Kane observed, nodding toward the hobbled mules and the wagon. "Tom himself couldn't 'a' took more care o' that harness, an' they *might* 'a' left them mules run loose."

"Yuh'd oughta be grateful," chuckled Piney Jackson.

"I am. Oh, yes, shore I am, an' then a li'l, on top o' that. Bet I never see my black cayuse again."

Red had reason to be pessimistic. The black was an excellent horse; speedy, good wind and bottom and an extraordinarily easy keeper. The thieves had lifted a prize and doubtless knew it by this time.

"Where's the safe? That's what I'd like to know." Thus Buck Saylor, staring about him.

"Here she is!" replied Kansas Casey, craning his neck to see over a willowbush.

The horsemen crowded up. There was the Wells Fargo safe, right side up and yawningly empty. The door, hinges wrenched crookedly and snapped across, lay

front downward on the crushed grass. An acrid odor hung about the safe.

"Giant," averred Red Kane, sniffing.

"Shore," said Dolan, a storekeeper and the local justice. "Likely they was miners."

"Miners ain't the only folks know how to use blastin' powder," declared Red. "It might 'a' been anybody."

"It probably was," Dolan said dryly. "I wonder where the box is."

They poked about among the bushes and came at last upon the express box, smashed open and as empty as the safe, near the spring. Stuck in a crack of the splintered lid was a folded bit of paper. Red Kane was the first to reach the paper. He spread out and smoothed it against the swell fork of his saddle, the others jostling each other to read over his shoulders the few lines of pencilled printing that sprawled waveringly across the gray and grimy surface. The wording ran:

hope you had a goode ride thanks for the money we didn't expect so much you'll notice we tuk goode care of your mules an harness we needed your two hosses so we'll take 'em with us we'll come again sometime goodby.

"An' there you are," said Red Kane, handing the paper to Kansas Casey. "All we gotta do is wait till they come again."

CHAPTER THREE

THE SUDDEN LADY

It would seem that the men of Farewell were destined to wait even as Red Kane said, for there were no tracks, — at least no appreciable trail leading out of the draw. Here and there were hoofmarks, but these were lost on hard ground three hundred yards farther east.

"Looks like a stand-off," observed Kansas Casey. "But we gotta do somethin'."

He divided the posse into pairs and groups of threes and fours and sent these out in all directions to hunt signs. Red Kane and his brother Tom rode together.

Late in the afternoon they sighted the old ranch-house at the base of Sweetwater Mountain.

"They ain't nothin' there, I guess," observed Tom Kane. "Might's well swing off to the south toward the gap between Sweetwater and the Sandy Hills. Maybe them bandits went through there. If they went east, they shore did."

"We'd ought to look at that ranch-house first," demurred Red.

"What for? Nobody's lived there since the K C outfit sold out to the Cross-in-a-box five year ago. What'sa use wastin' time, Red? Yo're always wantin' to slide off to one side. I never see such a jigger. Besides, I wanta get home some time tonight."

"Now we're gettin' at it," grinned Red. "It ain't so much my ridin' away from the line as it is yore wantin' to get home that bothers you, huh?"

"Well, they's my mules an' my wagon back there in

that draw, an' they's yore mules too. What'll Old Salt say if anythin' happens to 'em? I should think you'd be anxious about 'em. Most any rightminded man would be. But not you. Whadda you care for other folks' property? Nothin', that's all. It might all get lost or stole an' you wouldn't bat an eye-winker."

"Aw, the mules are all right. I want my black pony. She's the best cayuse in my string and the best cuttin' pony in the territory, bar none. You make me sick, you an' yore mules! You act like yore mules an' yore old cracker-box of a wagon was important, really worth somethin'. My li'l black hoss tops 'em by —"

"Yore li'l black hoss! Yore li'l black accordeen, you mean. It ain't even as good as an accordeen. An accordeen'll play tunes, an' that hoss — Why, all that hoss is good for is to bite folks. He bit me yes'day aft'noon, an' —"

"Bit yuh, did he?" interrupted Red in a grieved tone. "I was wonderin' what made him so sick last night. The poor li'l feller. You'd oughtn't to tantalize round him that way. Don't you do it no more, Tom, after I get him back. I don't aim to have my hosses made dyspeptics for life through bitin' chunks out o' you. Nawsir, I can't have it, Tom, 'deed I can't. You be careful now an' leave the poor hoss be."

The stung Tom retorted profanely. Red listened admiringly. His brother's grasp of vivid utterance never failed to impress him.

"That's great," approved Red when Tom paused for breath. "You done better'n yuh did the last time, remember, when yuh fell over that box o' can tomatters in the dark and fetched up with yore face against the stove. Mule-skinnin' shore does help a gent thataway, don't it?"

Thus the time passed profitably till they came to the old K C ranch-house under Sweetwater Mountain. They approached the place carelessly. But one look at the corral

brought them alive with a jerk. Horses were visible through the gaps between the posts.

"What are you doin'?"

There was more than a hint of amusement in the soft voice that spoke from the kitchen window of the ranch-house. Both men turned swiftly in their saddles. Red, at sight of the horses in the corral, had pulled his six-shooter. Now, confronted by a very good-looking girl, he slid the gun back into its holster and hoped she hadn't seen him pull it. But she had. Her snapping black eyes twinkled at him.

"I'm not considered dangerous," she announced in a delicious drawl, putting up a sunburnt hand to push back a mop of curly black hair. "Your friend needn't worry!" she added significantly.

"He ain't my friend," apologized Red, removing his hat. "He's my brother, an' he ain't always accountable." Here he kicked his brother on the ankle, adjuring him in a fierce whisper to put away his six-shooter.

Tom, who had been as he said later, "struck all of a heap" to find the old K C ranch occupied by a woman, hastily holstered his gun and wiggled an agonized ankle.

"Were you lookin' for anythin'?" inquired the girl.

"No ma'am, no, not a-tall," disclaimed Red Kane.

"We was just passin' by," amplified Tom Kane, meanwhile endeavoring to snatch an unobtrusive look at the animals in the corral.

"You don't have to twist around so and rub your ear and all in order to look into the corral," the girl said kindly. "Ride right up to the gate and enjoy yourself. Don't mind me."

Red Kane laughed outright. Tom looked rather sour. Confound the woman. She was too observing by half.

"I — I — they — we — we lost some hosses," he stuttered, "an' we thought maybe they might 'a' strayed over here."

"I suppose that's why you tried to look into the corral instead of asking me straight out whether I'd seen them," observed the girl, ceasing abruptly to twinkle.

"Oh, no, ma'am, no," Tom hastened to assure her, but his effort was not convincing.

The girl nodded eying him steadily.

"You don't do it well," she remarked indifferently.

"Ma'am," said Red Kane, "you mustn't mind Tom. He's always been the fool o' the family. I'm beggin' yore pardon for him. You see, they's been a robbery over to Farewell, an' fifty thousand dollars an' two hosses are missin'. I was just wonderin' if yuh'd seen anybody ride by this mornin' or afternoon."

"Not a soul," she told him, and began again to twinkle her black eyes. "I wish father was home. He might have met somebody, although he didn't mention it at dinner. He's out on the range now. One of our horses has strayed."

"An' he's huntin' it," observed Tom Kane.

"He is," said the girl. "Why don't you wait till he rides in? Maybe he could help you out."

"Good idea," nodded Tom. "We will."

He dismounted, loosened cinches, watered his horse in the tiny brook running from the spring behind the house and made himself comfortable in the shade of a cottonwood. Red remained in the saddle. He looked after his brother, whimsical disapproval written large upon his countenance.

"Tom never did have no manners," he confided to the girl. "Then again, he don't like ladies, Tom don't. Outside o' that, he's all right, if he is my brother."

"That's a strong-lookin' pony," said the girl critically, ignoring Red's persiflage.

"He is," nodded Red, "but he ain't nothin' to my li'l black the bandits rustled. That was a hoss. If I ever catch the sports that run him off, I'll shore make 'em hard

to find. I guess I'll just water this feller if you don't mind."

He nodded to her, put on his hat, rode to the brook and allowed his mount an even ten swallows. Then he rode back to the kitchen. The girl had deserted the window for the doorway. She stood with her arms folded across the breast of her man's flannel shirt and watched him with bright, alert eyes.

"You're careful of a horse," she said, smiling up at him. "Ten's all I allow when they're hot, too, but people as a rule don't care much. They think a cow-pony'll stand anythin'."

"People are careless," he told her, dismounting and crooking his arm round the saddle-horn. "Awful careless. Sometimes they're careless in what they say — an' do — an' hurt folks' feelin's without meanin' to."

She nodded. She caught his meaning perfectly.

"I don't believe you've looked in our corral yet," said she.

"I don't need to — now," was his answer.

"How do you know I'm not a bold, bad horse-thief? I might be. I might have stolen the fifty thousand, too. You don't know. They say a nester will do anythin'."

A certain bitterness underlay her tone and words. It would seem that nestering, for this curly-headed girl, had not been an easy path to follow. Red Kane looked straight into her black eyes.

"I never said nothin' about nesters," he declared.

"You're a cow-man like all the rest. At least, I suppose you're a cow-man."

"I'm a puncher all right, but I believe in livin' an' lettin' live. She's a free country."

"Some folks seem to think differently."

"Some folks always do. Wouldn't be a human world if they didn't. You got a right nice li'l place here."

This was the boldest flattery, for a more dilapidated

residence than the K C ranch-house would be difficult to find. The roof had fallen in at one end, and every window lacked glass. The kitchen door hung slantingly from leather hinges, and the weather-worn skeleton of a cow that had died of big jaw gleamed whitely through the tall grass beside the kitchen chimney.

The girl looked sharply at Red. But there was no sarcasm in the puncher's expression. He had merely meant to be polite.

"I'll have it lookin' like somethin' in time," she said. "Haven't had much chance yet. We only pulled in yesterday. The wagons aren't all unloaded yet."

"All?"

"We've two wagons — and there's just the two of us, dad and I. Funny, isn't it?"

"Funny? Why, I dunno —"

"I can tell just what you're thinkin' about, Mister Man. Your face is like big print. You're wonderin' about us. Two wagons, and nesters usually have but one and a pair of three-legged crow-baits cuddlin' the pole, and nothin' much to do with, take 'em all round. I wonder are these folks all right. That's what you're thinkin', I can tell. Can't fool me." The girl threw up her chin and laughed a hard mirthless laugh. "You citizens are the most suspicious lot I ever saw," she continued. "You think nobody has a right on earth but your own high and mighty selves. He's a nester, is he? Rub him out, if it can be done legally or half-legally. Run off his cattle and horses, anyway. Make trouble for him till he has to pick up and move again. But I guess we're here to stay, Mister Man."

She stared at him defiantly. Taken aback by her outburst, he essayed a feeble grin.

"I hope yuh do stay, ma'am. I'd be shore sorry to see yuh go. I dunno why yuh think yuh won't be treated right here."

"Do you know the 88 ranch?" she asked abruptly. "We came by there, and the manager was pretty disagreeable."

"Lanpher, huh? He's that manager feller. Don't yuh care what he says. He's so tight across the chest he can't unbutton his vest, and he's too mean to catch cold. He even hates himself, the lizard. Don't yuh think of him a-tall. We don't."

"I see. Well, you can go on about your business whenever you feel like it, you and your brother."

Red's surprised jaws dropped with almost an audible click.

"I thought you asked us to stay till yore father got home," he puzzled.

"I did. I didn't know then what I know now, and I don't want you round any longer. Slide, the two of you. Go on back to Lanpher, and tell him 'Dot' Lorimer said to come himself next time."

With the words she reached behind the door and brought out a Winchester and trained the firearm on Red Kane's stomach. Tom Kane got hastily to his feet. Red did not move.

"You by the spring," said the girl, not removing her eyes from Red's amazed face, "climb on your horse and wander. One wrong move and your brother gets a pill."

Red Kane hooked his thumbs over his hat.

"Ma'am," he cried, "would you mind tellin' me, before I go, why you said, 'Go back to Lanpher'?"

"Because you're one of his men. Now — "

"But I ain't. What makes yuh think I am?"

"Don't lie to me. Get aboard and get a-goin'. I've fooled with you long enough. Drag it!"

Without another word Red Kane swung up and followed his departing brother.

"Nice sociable lady," sputtered Tom Kane when Red joined him. "You'd think we was bandits or somethin'.

I'll bet she'd 'a' plugged yuh, Red, if yuh'd wiggled yore ear at her."

"Shore she would," agreed Red. "She had the old cannon headed straight where my dinner's gonna be an' her finger on the trigger. Yessir, she's shore a jim hicky, that girl."

Tom Kane caught the enthusiasm in Red's tone.

"You act like she'd done somethin' amusin', instead of offerin' to blow yore lights out." Tom's voice was a raucous snarl.

"Well, they was my lights, an' still are," Red said equably. "I like her spirit, I do. Gimme a girl with git-up-an'-git to her every time."

"Yo're welcome to her — This way, Red, if we're goin' down between Sweetwater an' the Sandy Hills — I don't want nothin' to do with her myself."

"You wouldn't stand no show with her anyhow. What do you know about women?"

"Nothin', thank Gawd, an' I don't wanna, neither. I got sense thataway. You go fussin' round a woman, an', before yuh know it, yo're in love with her, an' next yuh know yo're married. Then you are up a stump."

"Oh, I dunno. A feller might be a lot worse off than married."

"Yeah, he might be dead."

"You dunno. You never was either."

"An' I'm gonna claw free o' both while I got my health. What do you guess made her search out her gun anyway? I was watchin' the pair of yuh, an' I didn't see *you* do nothin'."

"I didn't. I was just talkin' to her, an' all of a sudden she sort o' looked past me, an' her eyes got hard. Next I knowed she was holdin' the gun on me an' tellin' me what to do."

"Looked past yuh?"

"Shore — over my shoulder like."

"What at?"

"How'd I know — by — !" Red jerked his horse to a sliding halt and slid to the ground. "Look at that!" he exclaimed, pointing at the name and brand carved on the front of the saddle's cantle. "'Jack Owens, 88.' This here is Jack Owens' old saddle, an' I never thought. O' course she got suspicious prompt an' sudden when she seen that. I dunno," he added, mounting and wheeling his horse, "but what I'll go back an' tell her it's all a mistake."

"I would!" cried his brother, as a puff of gray smoke clouded across the kitchen doorway of the ranch-house and a bullet buzzed overhead. "I shore would, if I was you! The range ain't over eight hundred yards, an' the next piece o' lead might not flip past up yonder. It might sift through yore thick head. I'm tellin' yuh that female means business."

"Aw, she ain't to blame!" protested Red, reluctantly turning his horse's head. "Appearances is against us."

"An' she's shore agreein' with appearances steady an' strong. There goes another."

A bullet kissed the earth twenty yards to the left, struck a rock and ripped off at an acute angle with a high shrill whine.

"Ain't she a jo-darter?" grinned Red, chin on shoulder, looking back at the ranch-house as he jogged along.

"I dunno what she is," Tom Kane said disgustedly, "but I know yo're a fool. 'Fore I'd let a female jerk me down that-away! Why, one minute after you seen her, you forgot what you was doin'. You even forgot yore li'l black hoss. Yes, yuh did. Can't tell me yuh didn't. I know better. Yuh didn't even try to look in the corral after she spoke."

"I didn't need to, but I'm gamblin' you did."

"You better believe I did. I ain't lettin' no curly hair tangle up my eyesight."

"Yuh didn't see the rustled hosses in the corral, did yuh?"

"Naturally not, or I would 'a' said so. They was eight hosses in that corral, all collar-marked. D Both Ways right hip was the iron on two of 'em. Couldn't see the others. They was headin' wrong."

"Seein' they was all team hosses, you was a heap disappointed, huh?"

"I didn't say so."

"Yuh didn't have to. Yuh looked it, old sour-ball. Tom, yore milk o' human kindness is all addled up. Sometimes I wonder can this mistrustin', fault-findin' undertaker with the face long like a pony's be my brother. Yessir, that shore bothers me a lot sometimes."

"Nemmine about my milk o' human kindness. I don't go spillin' it round promiscuous like other folks I know of. *Nesters,* an' you a cow-man!"

"Not nesters, *nester,* frosty-face. I dunno nothin' against Paw Lorimer, but Miss Dot Lorimer is shore the one for my money. Yessir, Tom, y' ol' coffee-cooler, that's that li'l lady I'm gonna marry."

Tom gulped, gasped, ran two fingers round the inside of his collar, rubbed both ears and shook his head vigorously.

"Somethin's gone wrong with my hearin'," he announced after an anxious moment. "I shore thought you said that nester lady was the one you was gonna marry."

"You heard right." Red placidly eyed his brother.

"There, I'm hearin' funny noises again," Tom cried in alarm.

"You ain't hearin' no funny noises, feller. Yo're hearin' the truth. I ain't surprised yuh don't know it, yuh use it so seldom."

Tom ignored the slander.

"Yuh don't like her already!" he exclaimed. "Yuh

can't! Why, yuh just seen her. Aw, Red, whatsa matter with yuh? Are yuh crazy?"

"Yeah, I'm crazy — crazy like a fox. You heard me, I'm gonna marry that girl. She dunno it yet, but she will."

"That's good. You'll tell her before yuh marry her, huh? She'd like to know maybe. Women are funny thataway."

"An yo're tryin' to be an' makin' a boggy ford of it. Listen here, Tom, I'm tellin' yuh about this, but I'm expectin' yuh to keep it behind yore front teeth, see."

"Don't yuh fret, I ain't anxious to have folks know what a idjit they is in the family. Nawsir, not me. I'll never tell. I'll keep it under my hat same's if it was fits or web-feet."

CHAPTER FOUR

THE NESTER

"We didn't find no tracks round Sweetwater," said Red reporting to Kansas Casey in the sheriff's office at Farewell. "We scouted past that gap between the mountain an' the Sandy Hills, too, but we didn't find one smidgin' of a track. Did any o' the others find anythin'?"

"They did not, nary a find. She's a mystery. Here we was out four days an' rode our hosses down to whispers an' no luck a-tall. An' three days ago, while we was gone, two sports held up the stage south of Injun Ridge an' went through the passengers."

"Kill anybody?"

"Naw, but they got five watches an' about a thousand dollars, which ain't a bad ten minutes' work, even countin' in the risk."

"Who was ridin' shotgun?"

"Nobody. They wasn't carryin' no box that trip. An' the bandits expected a box too, an' give everybody aboard a cussin' 'cause she wasn't there. Looks like old times shore once again."

"They's a-plenty cottonwoods," Red observed dryly, "an' we all got ropes."

"You'll be needin' 'em before we're through, not that I hold with lynchin', officially speakin', me bein' a deputy sheriff as duly made and provided, but I got my own idea o' what's the best cure for the road-agent business."

"Did yuh tell Kansas about the nesters?" inquired Tom Kane, looking up from his task of greasing wagon-

wheels as his brother scuffed round the corner of the house.

"Shore not," replied Red, sitting down on a handy case. "Question: What business is it o' his? Answer: Why, no business a-tall. Got the makin's?"

"They're in the shack, but nemmine about no makin's now. Gimme a hand with these wheels, you lazy cow-wrastler, instead o' sittin' there a-wearin' out my packin'-cases with the seat o' yore pants. There's the wrench, an' there's a box of axle-dope. Hop to it, feller."

"Lordy," groaned Red, "don't I never get a chance to rest?"

"Not round me yuh don't. When yuh goin' back to the Bar S?"

"When Piney Jackson gets the buckboard fixed. He ain't got a light wheel in stock, an' he's gotta make all new spokes. Piney knows how to charge, too. Old Salt'll roar like a bull when he gets the bill. He'll make out it's all my fault somehow."

"Betcha he tries to take it out o' yore wages," was Tom's bright suggestion.

"Tryin' an' doin' ain't even in the same corral. Aw, Old Salt's all right so long's yuh watch him."

"So's a mule. Yuh'll never screw on the nut thataway, Red. It's a left-hand thread. Don't yuh know nothin'?"

In this wise the wheel-greasing proceeded to a successful close and the driven Red fled to the Blue Pigeon Store. Here he found Kansas Casey deep in conversation with Mike Flynn, the proprietor.

"I'm feelin' a heap proud to-day," Red announced, grinning at the two men, "an' I guess I'll buy me a shirt. I always gotta buy somethin' when I feel proud."

"You ain't got nothin' to be proud about," Kansas said seriously. "Do you see anythin' he's got to be proud of, Mike?"

"Wait till after I sell him his shirt," smiled the Irishman. "Any partic'lar kind, Red?"

"They's one yonder on the fourth shelf right behind yuh looks kind o' good. Yeah, that one. Them li'l purple hoss-shoes sprinkled all over the gray makes it look a heap festive, don't it?"

"Shore does," concurred Kansas. "All you need now is a yaller han'kerchief round yore neck an' leave yore hat off an' folks will shore see sunset a-comin'."

"Nemmine about my hair. I know she's red, an' that's a good color, — lucky too. Only the best people has red hair. If yuh'll notice, they ain't so many of us, but what they is is fine strain an' corn-fed, y'betcha. Lookit me now. Where'll you find a better feller, take him all round, huh? I'm askin' yuh, an' yuh can't answer. No, of course not."

"How strong the breeze is to-day, Mike," observed Kansas. "They must be a window open some'ers."

"They is," said Red. "Several. All yuh gotta do is lay back an' enjoy it. She's free, all free. Yuh'd oughta appreciate it, 'stead o' prancin' round makin' remarks. Ain't that so, Mike? Nemmine, don't answer. Maybe he might hold it against yuh, an' go over to Calloway's for his makin's. How much did yuh say that shirt was? Two dollars four-bits, huh? Here y' are. If she wears out under a year, I'll lay for yuh an' burn the store."

"Lemme know when you're comin'," Mike requested serenely. "Hello, Tom."

"'Lo, Mike." Tom, entering, looked hard at the newspaper-wrapped bundle under his brother's arm. "Bet he's done one o' two things, Red has — he's either bought one shirt or two."

"One," tattled Kansas. "Ain't he the spendthrift?"

"He's worse'n that," Tom averred, fixing his brother with a gloomy stare. "A shirt! A new shirt! It must be true. He's a goner."

"Web-feet an' fits! Web-feet an' fits!" Red bawled to head him off.

"That's what it is all right," grunted Tom, and marched out, rank disapproval in every line of his stiff back.

Kansas Casey seized the lobe of his right ear and moved it slowly to and fro.

"You like to deefened me with yore 'web-feet an' fits'," he told Red. "Next time you go to whirlin' yore voice, whirl her the other way. An' what is 'web-feet an' fits' anyhow?"

"What yuh wanna know for? Did yuh lose any?"

At this point diversion was created by the entrance of a stranger. He was a long, lean citizen, this stranger, with lank black hair, sharp blue eyes and bat ears. He wore two guns and an air of great alertness.

The bat-eared one leaned hip-shot against the counter and nodded to Mike Flynn.

"Got any Winchester .45's?" he asked.

"Shore."

"I'll take four boxes o' them an' six for my Colts, same caliber, an' —"

Here the bat-eared man was interrupted by a strange and raucous voice squawking:

"Help! Help! Don't kill me! Gimme that ax! Oh, my Gawd in heaven! That's right! Cut her yellow throat! What you think it that feller him got? Two dead men lib for beach! What's the odds! Stick her again! She stole my watch! Murder! Murder! Murder! Gawd bless our home and make me a good boy! Get outa here, you dirty dog!"

At the first words uttered by the raucous voice the bat-eared man sprang backward a yard and drew both guns. Crouching forward, his narrow-slitted eyes swept the counter. Muscles in cheek and jaw quivered tensely.

Marked interest flickered in the eyes of Kansas Casey

and Red Kane. They watched the bat-eared man curiously. From behind the counter Mike Flynn smiled reassuringly at the bat-eared man and flung up a hand, palm pacifically outward.

"If yo're gonna shoot," calmly remarked Mr. Flynn, "I'd take it kindly if yuh'd p'int them carronades outdoors."

The bat-eared man straightened slowly. His gaze did not waver from the eyes of Mike Flynn. Realizing that hostilities were unwarranted, the bat-eared gentleman slid his guns into their holsters.

"I been sick," vouchsafed the bat-eared one quietly. "I ain't well yet — not complete. Still nervous — sometimes. What made that noise?"

Mike Flynn stooped behind the counter and groped purposefully among cans. When he straightened there roosted on his doubled fist a parrot, green and red, with a mild and filmy eye. The bird stared solemnly about him. Balancing on one foot it scratched its head and giggled.

"I saw yer steal the whiskey," the parrot observed in a raucous but remarkably human voice. "I'll tell Tom, I will. I'll wring yer neck, see if I don't! 'Alf an' 'alf! Gimme a kiss! I love yer! Cross my heart! Grab her! Grab her! Kill the cop! Kill the cop! There goes the window. Don't let her get away! Smash her face in and throw her out in the alley! Hellelujah! Hallelujah! Gawd bless my soul! Who's a good boy? I am!"

The parrot ceased talking and with its beak proceeded industriously to search the back of its neck. A slight smile parted the thin lips of the bat-eared man. He pushed back his hat and rubbed a wide forehead.

"Ain't she the hellion?" chuckled Mike Flynn, tickling the parrot between the eyes. "She shore knows a lot, Percival does."

"She? Percival?" The bat-eared one stared inquiringly at Mike Flynn.

"She thinks she's a boy," explained Mike, "but I know better. The first thing she done after gittin' in from the Coast was lay an egg in me hat. She has no morals, the crayture."

"I can lick yer with one hand!" screamed the parrot. "And I will if yer don't shut up! Oh, my Gawd, you've killed her! I told yer not to use a knife! Hurrah for the bloody duster!"

"She's seen life, has Percival," smiled Mike Flynn, "an' death too, I'm thinkin'. There, yuh divil, in wit' yuh."

He tossed the bird through the open door of the cage on a shelf at his back, closed the door, and pulled a black cloth over the cage.

"There now," he continued, "she'll kape quiet. Anythin' else besides the cartridges, Mister?"

"Twenty-four can tomatters an' six boxes matches," replied the bat-eared man, now wholly at his ease. "Got any milk, Hyacinth brand, huh? Aw right, twelve cans an' twenty pounds o' coffee. Any candy, have yuh?"

"Dozen pails came in this mornin' — chocolates an' hard candies, half an' half."

"I'll take a pail o' the chocolate. My daughter likes chocolate candies, she does. An' yuh might wrap up three — four pounds peppermint sticks. Them striped like a barber's pole. She likes them, too. I guess that'll be about all."

Kansas Casey, sitting on the counter and swinging spurred heels, looked idly out through the doorway into dusty Main Street.

When the bat-eared man departed with his purchases, Kansas Casey was still looking through the doorway. He watched the bat-eared man drop his bulging sack behind the seat of an extremely sway-backed buckboard and make it fast with a lariat. He watched the man untie his team, heave his lanky body into the seat and drive away.

In the light of recent events Kansas Casey had more than a passing interest in strangers.

"Who's that, Mike?" he asked.

"I never seen him before," was the Irishman's answer. "I did hear how they was a nester throwed down over near Sweetwater Mountain. Maybe it's him."

"Maybe. I heard o' that nester, too. Do you know this gent, Red?"

"Who? Me?" Kane replied carelessly. "I guess maybe it might be him — that nester, yuh can't tell. Name's Lorimer, or somethin' like that."

"Oh," said Kansas Casey, and he appeared to reflect. "Kind o' loosened up on the language after Percival made his li'l speech, didn't he?"

"Shore did. He was sort o' dumb an' dumpish-like before." Thus Red Kane, extracting tobacco from a shirtpocket.

"Guess maybe he must 'a' been right serious-sick to have nerves that bad, the poor fellah," Mike said with a knowing wink.

"Yeah, I guess — I guess maybe." Kansas Casey did not glance at Mike Flynn. He looked fixedly at the toes of his own boots.

"Aw, he's all right," declared Red Kane warmly.

"Who said he wasn't?" Kansas Casey looked hard at Red Kane.

"Well, yuh don't have to say much to mean a whole lot."

"Which goes double," grinned Kansas. "What was that he said about his daughter?"

"Daughter?" Red Kane exclaimed in a surprised tone. "Did he say anythin' about a daughter?"

"Didn't he, Mike?"

"Shore did. Bought the candy for her, he said."

"Le's you'n me go get a drink, Red," suggested Kansas, slipping to the floor with a thud and a jingle.

"We'll get two drinks," amended Red Kane, following his friend to the street. "Where yuh goin', Kansas? That ain't the way to the Happy Heart."

"Nemmine about that drink — now. This here freight wagon is where we're a-goin', an' we're gonna sit on the tongue, you'n me together, an' yo're gonna tell me secrets."

"You've got 'em unusual bad to-day, Kansas," Red assured him seriously. "I always knowed, if yuh kept on a-lappin' it up an' a-lappin' it up all same sponge, yuh'd go loco. An' yuh have, an' yuh've went."

"Whadda yuh know about that jigger Lorimer, Red?" inquired Kansas, coming straight to the point.

"Who? Me?" Red Kane elevated surprised eyebrows.

"Yuh done said 'Who? Me?' before. Change hosses, Red. It's 'What? Him?'"

"Oh, yeah, o' course, shore, an' all like that. What do yuh think I am, a cyclophobia? I dunno all the nesters in the country, do I?"

Red Kane glared indignantly at Kansas Casey. The latter grinned back.

"Don't tell me," said Kansas. "Yuh've seen that daughter anyhow. Don't try to tell me different. Why did yuh stick up for him there in the Blue Pigeon less yuh had some reason?"

"I might have lots o' reasons — whole herds o' reasons, an' none of 'em yore business."

"There yuh go gettin' mad just 'cause I hinted this gent wasn't maybe always a holy Christian."

"I ain't gettin' mad!" Red denied vigorously.

"Then what yuh gettin' all red about?" jibed Kansas. "The daughter, what's she like? Hell's bells, ain't I yore best friend? Don't yuh glom all my tobacco alla time? Don't I ride yore hosses for yuh an' bust 'em gentle when you ain't able? Shore I do — all that, an' more. An'

here yuh turn me down cold. Yo're a suspicious cuss, Red. Always lookin' on the black side. Never trust nobody, you don't. I'll bet you think I really wanna go over to Sweetwater Mountain an' cut yuh out or somethin'."

"I ain't never been to Lorimer's ranch but once, not that she's any o' yore business like I said previous."

"She's a wide, free world, an' I ain't sayin' yuh know Lorimer — I don't think yuh do, or yuh'd 'a' spoke there in the store — but yuh've done met up with the girl some-'ers."

"What if I have?" Red's eyes steadily held those of Kansas.

"Oh, nothin', only I'd like yuh to see somethin' I got in the office."

Kansas led the way to the sheriff's office. The office was the front room of the sheriff's house. Jake Rule, the sheriff of Fort Creek County, was abroad on business. But it was not his custom to lock either his house or his home-made desk.

Kansas opened the wide deskdrawer. From the drawer he drew a sheaf of notices. Leafing through them rapidly, he found that which he sought and handed it to Red Kane.

Clipped of legal verbiage, the notice set forth that one John Hudson was wanted for rustling and horse-stealing, said heinous crimes having been committed in Lang County. The notice bore a date three years old. It likewise carried a fairly comprehensive list of John Hudson's salient characteristics. One of these points of interest was a bushy black beard.

"Ben Lorimer ain't got no beard a-tall," objected Red Kane.

"They's such a thing as shavin'," suggested Kansas Casey. "It has been done. If you'd do it, it would help yore face, Red."

Red told Kansas where he could go and laid the notice on the desk.

"You can't prove nothin' by this notice," said Red Kane. "Besides, I don't believe he done it anyway."

"She must be a shore good-looker."

"What's that gotta do with it?" wrathfully.

"Nothin', nothin' a-tall. I was just gonna say that I guess I'd better climb on my rockin'-hoss an' slide out after this stranger an' sort o' look round where he goes. Whadda you guess?"

"Yo're on the wrong range, I keep tellin' yuh! Why, Kansas, she wouldn't let him do nothin' out o' the way. I know she wouldn't. Aw, you make me sick! Yo're a reg'lar he-wolf! Yuh needn't stand there grinnin' like a chessy-cat. Yuh needn't go pokin' fun neither. You know I ain't no more likely to help out a hoss thief than you are. But they ain't no hoss thieves in the Lorimer outfit, you can gamble on that."

"Alla same, here's this man Lorimer a dead ringer for the sharp in this notice, leavin' out the beard, o' course. They's the same thin lips, straight nose, black eyes, black hair, six-foot-two or thereabout, weight a hundred an' seventy-five, quick in his movements an' on the trigger. What more do yuh want? Don't it all fit?"

"It might fit a description of you," said Red sharply. "Yore lips ain't thick, yore nose ain't crooked, you got black hair an' eyes, yore weight is between one seventy an' one eighty, an' you move quick. Comin' right down to cases why don't yuh arrest yoreself on suspicion?"

"Look here —" began Kansas.

"Goin' farther," interrupted Red, "they's Daly right here in town. He fills out that description same's you do. They's Dunlavy, the Wells Fargo agent at Marysville. How about him?"

"Aw, we all know they didn't do it. We know they're honest."

"How do we know they're honest any more'n we know this here stranger is dishonest?"

"Well, he's a nester, this feller," was Kansas Casey's undeniably lame answer.

"You dunno he's a nester. He may be, an' he may not. Yuh dunno nothin' about him."

"If you don't think he is, why you fightin' so hard for him?"

"Fair play. What else?"

At which Kansas Casey was moved to smile, for he had never known Red Kane to be so public spirited. But he did not smile. Instead he picked up the Lang County notice and reread it.

"Here," said he suddenly, pointing to a line of fine print at the very bottom of the sheet, "we missed this, Red. It says here John Hudson has a knife scar on his right arm half-way between elbow an' shoulder. That's how we're gonna tell whether this stranger is our John Hudson or not."

"Yore John Hudson," corrected Red Kane acidly. "I got nothin' to do with this, an' yuh can stick a pin in that."

"That's all right. Le's wander."

CHAPTER FIVE

THE COTTONWOOD

"HERE'S where he left the trail," said Kansas Casey, glancing up from the wheelmarks and turning his horse to follow them. "Strikin' off due east. Go yuh ten he's the Sweetwater gent, Red."

Red Kane shook his head. He was too uncomfortable in his mind to even smoke. He was not a susceptible person. Far from it. But Miss Dot Lorimer had hit him hard. He had never seen any one quite like her before. That his wages were forty a month and "found" troubled him not at all. His was a hopeful soul, and the age was a hopeful age. A strong man, provided he kept his head, could go far. With Dot Lorimer as his wife, Red Kane saw himself making wheelmarks in the sands of time. He would save his money, buy a few cows, start a brand of his own and become a large cattleman, like his employer, Mr. Saltoun, the owner of the Bar S. He would branch out in other lines too. All rich men did. Mines, for choice. Yes, he thought he would invest in mines and become richer. And all to the end that the curly-haired lady his wife might wear as many diamonds as she desired. Red Kane had an imagination indeed.

"Hey!" It was a loud, healthy roar uttered by Kansas Casey.

Red Kane lifted his gray eyes to Casey's face. "Did yuh say somethin'?" he asked softly.

"Me? Oh, no, I never said nothin'. I only spoke to yuh four times, tha's all."

"It's enough. Was yuh doin' it for exercise, or what?"

"I just wanted yuh to tell me the joke. You've been a-ridin' along a-grinnin' an' a-chucklin' to yoreself, an' every now an' then yuh'd slap yore leg an' laugh out loud."

"That's shore funny. I always laugh out loud. I got the habit young, an' I never got over it. Gimme the makin's, will yuh?"

Kansas Casey handed across tobacco and papers. Red Kane helped himself and handed them back.

"Wouldn't yuh like a match?" Kansas inquired sarcastically.

"No, I got one. I got tobacco an' papers too, but I wanna smoke yores up first, so's I won't run short. Nothin' like lookin' ahead, is they, Kansas?"

"I've met up with gall," the other declared bitterly, "all kinds o' gall, but yores puts the hat on the climax."

"Now that's a real compliment," Red told him. "That makes me feel like life's worth livin' after all. I used to have my doubts, but not now. Just for that, old-timer, when we get back to Farewell I'll let you buy me a drink. No, I'll let you buy me two drinks. It's worth that."

"I'll buy you some rock salt an' feed it to you through a shotgun," snarled Kansas, ostentatiously stuffing his tobacco and papers into the inside pocket of his vest.

"I'd put a padlock on that pocket if I was you," was Red's suggestion, "then yuh shore won't lose nothin'."

"I would if I had one," cried Kansas, "but then that wouldn't stop yuh if yuh really got thirsty for a smoke."

"No?" Red smiled slightly and with the butt of his quirt tickled the deputy's horse behind the saddle.

Now the average Western horse is touchy of its person behind the saddle. Casey's horse was a trifle more average than the average. Promptly at the flick of the brass-bound butt across its sensitive skin it tucked its tail be-

tween its hind legs, its nose between its forelegs, humped its back and shot straight up in the air.

Kansas lost his hat and one stirrup; but he stuck and he did not pull leather. He belted the pony with his quirt and strove to jerk up its head. After a moment he succeeded, and then the curb strap parted.

Now, a curb bit with a broken strap is no better than the veriest snaffle. At the sudden slackening of the pressure on its lower jaw the horse perceived the opportunity of a lifetime and seized it with all four feet and its mouth. It clamped its teeth, straightened its neck and, splitting the wind with crackling nostrils, raced across country full stretch.

Red, hooting with delight, retrieved the deputy's hat and followed. At the first draw reached by the runaway Red looked to see a tumble. But the horse darted down the near side of the draw and shot across the bottom with never a stagger. Red rode more circumspectly. His mount, one of Kansas Casey's horses, was one of whose surefootedness he knew nothing.

It is not a surprising thing that Kansas Casey was out of sight within three minutes. Red, never much of a trailer at best, followed the runaway's trail as well as he could. Twice he lost it, but contrived to pick it up on the sides of another draw.

At the end of five miles of rapid going he came upon Kansas Casey and his horse in the middle of a broad flat between two hills. The horse was galloping madly in a circle. Its outblown nostrils flared red. Its breathing was audible at two hundred yards. Kansas was swaying back on one rein and whirling his quirt cross-handed.

"I'll teach yuh to run away!" Kansas was gritting between his teeth. "I lay yore ribs'll look like a plowed field when I get through with yuh."

Eight rounds of the flat and the horse gave it up. It stood with hanging head, its flanks heaving in and out like

blacksmith's bellows. Kansas curled his reins round the saddle-horn, breathed long and deeply and wiped his dripping face with his sleeve. He looked about him. His eye fell on Red grinning at him not thirty feet away.

"Yo're a fine Injun!" cried Kansas hotly. "Oh, yo're a bird, you are! Why didn't yuh tell me yuh was gonna play a trick like that?"

"It wouldn't have been a trick if I had," smiled Red. "Anyway, y' ain't got no business ridin' if yuh' can't control yore hoss an' stay in the saddle. Lordy, it shore was funny to see yuh a-bobbin' up an' down thataway. Why, Kansas, I'll bet if I seen yore hoss's ears under yuh once, I seen 'em forty times. Wasn't the saddle comfortable, or what?"

"Yo're a cock-eyed liar," said Kansas, taking advantage of the fact that one may call a friend a liar and not be shot in the process. "Yuh couldn't 'a' slid a piece o' paper under me once."

"I dunno about no pieces of paper, but a pile o' books four feet high wouldn't 'a' had no trouble in doin' the trick. Nawsir."

"Well, anyway," growled Kansas in injured tones, for he really had been severely shaken up, "yuh hadn't oughta played a trick like that. Yuh might 'a' busted my neck."

"No such luck," denied Red in all seriousness, "yo're too mean to do a thing like that. I wish yuh wouldn't speak so cruel to yore li'l Reddy, who didn't mean no harm, an' is only doin' his level best to get along peaceful as possible in this vale of tears."

Red Kane, affecting to wipe his eyes, edged nearer to Kansas Casey.

"Nemmine comin' no closer!" cried Kansas, backing his horse hurriedly. "I ain't a-trustin' yuh one inch! Yo're too gayful to-day to suit me entirely. Gimme my lid."

Red sailed the hat toward him. Kansas caught it on the fly, clapped it on his head, and wheeled his horse.

"Gotta go back where we came from an' pick up the buckboard's trail again," he grumbled. "Just lookit the time we lose 'cause yuh had to play the fool. Honest, Red, sometimes I feel like gettin' mad with yuh."

"Don't do it. The last gent who done that died, poor fellow. Yuh dunno, yuh might be the next, yuh can't tell."

"I'm shore scared to death — Say, hear that!"

"That" was a shot twice repeated. It seemed to come from behind the more eastern of the two hills flanking the flat.

"I hear somebody a-bawlin' 'Help'," asserted Red Kane.

"Yore ears are better'n mine," said Kansas. "Hop to it."

They rounded the broad hill's foot at a lope, for the horses had not completely recovered their breath. Behind the hill, where the cottonwoods grow on the banks of Cow Creek, they came upon the man who had fired the shots and called for help.

He was the bat-eared stranger of the Blue Pigeon, and he was crumpled in the midst of the smashed wreck of his buckboard. A dead cottonwood was lying across his body. In his hand was a revolver. Beyond the buckboard the two-horse team stood quietly.

Red and Kansas slid to the ground, flung the reins over their horses' heads and set to work. Between the two of them, strong men both, they levered up the cottonwood and slid it to earth. Then they lifted out the bat-eared man — he had fainted at their first taking hold upon the cottonwood — and laid him on the grass. Superficially at least the man had suffered damage. His head was cut; his chest was cut; his right arm was scraped, torn and bleeding, from shoulder to wrist.

Kansas Casey muttered regretfully, eying the injured arm.

"They's no tellin' about that scar on the arm now," said Red Kane with something like relief in his voice. "You'll have to wait."

"I know it, but yuh needn't look so happy. We gotta tie him up. He's bleedin' pretty healthy. Wonder if he's hurt inside."

"Looks like he might be. You get water from the creek, Kansas, an' I'll fix up a bandage for him."

When Kansas returned from the creek with a hatful of water, Red, a series of white strips across one knee, was squatting beside the senseless man.

Dipping into Casey's hat with his own neck-handkerchief, Red Kane deftly washed clean the jagged cuts and tears. Then he bound them up tidily with strip after strip of the white stuff draped across his knee.

Kansas watched him, idly at first, then with suddenly awakened interest as he glimpsed a hem with buttonholes adorning the side of the strips. He arose hastily and went to his saddle and searched his saddle pockets. He came back more hastily than he had gone. And he did not cease to call upon strange gods. Red Kane looked placidly up at him.

"Whatsamatter?" queried Red Kane.

"Whatsamatter? Whatsamatter?" choked out the thoroughly provoked Kansas. "I'd ask whatsamatter! I'd tell a man, I would! You purple pirate, you done took my shirt, my white shirt, the only white shirt I got, an' tore it all up for bandages!"

"What right you got to a white shirt, I'd like to know?" demanded Red, shaking a lean finger at him. "You got nerve wearin' white shirts. You ain't a minister nor a undertaker an' you got a white shirt. Why, Kansas, when I looked in yore saddle pockets an' seen that shirt, I shore thought she must 'a' crawled in there

by mistake. I never had no idea *you* was the owner. So it was yores, huh?"

"Yes, it was mine, an' you'll get me another, or I'll shore crawl yore hump a few! You can't run no blazers on me, you long-legged rooster!"

"Lordy, Kansas, yo're shore hard to please. Why, if I hadn't 'a' used yore shirt, I'd 'a' had to use mine. Think o' that, an' be happy."

Kansas opened his mouth to reply, but the injured man, coming out of his faint, spoke first.

"I'm obliged to yuh for takin' the forest off my neck," said he in a weak voice.

"No trouble, a-tall," grinned Red. "Lucky we heard yuh shootin' an' shoutin'."

"She was only two shots," said the other, "an' that one yell was all I could manage. It's shore amazin' how a tree roostin' on yore chestbone cuts off yore wind." He dropped his eyes to his bandaged arm. "Tied up all same invalid," he continued. "Was that pail o' candy squashed?"

"Nary a squash," was Red's reassuring reply. "Missed everythin' behind the seat, that cottonwood did. I'd shore like to know how she came to drop so unlucky like just when you was passin'. They ain't no wind."

"Hit her with the hub o' my off front wheel," explained the hurt man. "Crack she went an' down she come. She was pretty rotten, I guess."

"Yeah," said Kansas, examining the stump. "Just punk. How yuh feelin'?"

"Tolerable," declared the other and strove to arise, but he sank back instantly, his face drawn with pain.

"Where's it the worst?" asked Red, bending over him.

"Left side, low down," whispered the man.

"Floatin' ribs, I guess," hazarded Red. "Yuh'd oughta have a doctor."

"Don't need one," the stranger contradicted weakly. "My daughter Dot, she's pretty good thataway. She set a busted leg for me once, an' it set grand. If I could get home, gents, I'd be all right."

"Where yuh live?"

"In the old ranch-house at the spring near Sweetwater Mountain. My name's Lorimer."

Kansas Casey could not forego a fleeting smile of satisfaction. In one premise, at least, he was correct. Red looked woodenly at Kansas.

"Guess maybe we could sort o' fix that buckboard," said he. "The wheels an' axles are still O K. But we ain't got nothin' to cut saplin's with."

"They's a ax an' a sawr under the buckboard seat," said Lorimer. "I always carry 'em for a e-mergency. Never know what's gonna drop in this country," he added with a whimsical smile.

CHAPTER SIX

Judge Lynch

They were yet two hundred yards from the ranch-house by the spring when Miss Lorimer came running to meet them. If she recognized Red Kane she gave no sign. She stooped above her father when the dreary makeshift of a vehicle halted, listened to his few words, ran deft hands over his body lightly, surely. She straightened her young figure, pushed the black curls out of her eyes and said:

"He has a broken rib and a badly scratched arm. I don't think he's otherwise much hurt beyond a few bruises. Bring him along. I'll get things ready."

She ran lithely back to the house. Red followed her flight without the slightest change of expression. He looked as stolid as a ship's figurehead. Kansas Casey stared after the lady a moment; then he looked at Red Kane. His eyes met Red's steady gray gaze. Whereupon Kansas Casey winked his off eye, stuck his tongue into his cheek and started the horses.

"I see you've changed saddles," observed the girl to Red Kane when her father was resting as comfortably as his set rib would allow him.

The two were standing at the kitchen doorway. Kansas Casey was busily engaged in chopping wood against the morrow. Red looked out to where his brother Tom's saddle hung on a corral post.

"Yeah." He smiled his engaging smile. "I made up my mind I wouldn't make that mistake again."

"What mistake?" Water running over ice was no colder than her tone.

"Jack Owens' saddle."

And Red went on to tell her the true story of the saddle and himself.

She did not look at him as he spoke. Instead, she gazed aloofly toward the western hills, dark against the setting sun. He could not be positive whether she believed him or not. She was certainly very beautiful standing there with the sunbeams playing redly on her face. How her black curls glistened in the glow! What would it be like to put a hand beneath her firm, round chin and tilt her head back? He wondered and, wondering, forgot that he was staring her out of countenance till she suddenly looked at him, her cheeks hot with a fire that sprang not from the sunshine.

"You're a plausible person," she told him, giving him stare for stare the while. "You tell a fairly straight story, — well strung together, as it were."

"Ma'am — " he began, a trifle hurt.

"Oh, I believe you," she drawled. "Why wouldn't I? Didn't you rescue my father and bring him home, — you and your friend? It was providential that you happened to be on hand. I am a little curious to know how you *happened* to be on hand, and how your friend *happens* to be a deputy sheriff. I suppose he's a deputy. He's wearing the star of one."

"I got lots o' different kinds o' friends," Red said vaguely, finding the ice brittle.

"I've noticed that — that and a certain persistency. Why were you coming out here again, — with a deputy sheriff?"

The black eyes narrowed ever so little, and the voice rang a bit hard.

"I didn't say I was comin' out here," objected Red, beginning to fidget on his feet.

"I know you didn't say so. You don't have to say so in so many words. I wasn't born the day before yesterday. What are your intentions?"

"I'm gonna marry you."

It was not the reply he had meant to give. It had bounced out on the spur of the moment. The girl's cheeks grew redder. Her black eyes sparkled. Then she smiled unpleasantly.

"So that's your trouble," she said thoughtfully. "Do you know, I thought, when I saw your friend was a deputy, that you had gotten the law to help you evict us. But why — if you intend to marry me — why bring a deputy sheriff? Why not a minister?"

"I didn't know you'd be willin' so quick."

At that she swung her arm to box his ear. But he had moved. Her fingers swept past his nose with four inches to spare.

"Always watch a person's eyes," said he gravely, standing six feet away, "then yuh can tell what's comin'. I was watchin' yores, watchin' 'em close. They're black all right, but they got lots o' fire in 'em." He watched her narrowly, saw that she was trembling violently, and altered his tone abruptly. "Aw, be reasonable," he continued beseechingly. "Be reasonable, can't yuh? I'm meanin' every word I say."

At which naïve announcement she began to laugh immoderately. He watched her in perplexity. He had heard of hysterics. Was she having them? Ought he to throw water on her or shake her? Which? He took a long breath and a step forward. As he moved, she ceased to laugh. He halted. She folded her arms and looked upon him, her expression solemn.

"You actually mean you want to marry me?" she drawled.

"Shore," he nodded.

"Why?"

"I like yore looks."

"Oh, my looks. I see. But you don't know me. I might be a most gosh-awful person for all you can tell."

"I'll take a chance." In all seriousness.

"You *are* a gambler. Risking your future, everything, all for the sake of black eyes and black hair and a straight nose. How do you know you'll love me, cherish me, and all that after I'm gray and decrepit? Have you thought of that?"

"Whatsa use?" was the cynical reply. "I'd rather think about now. But I tell yuh this — an' I ain't foolin', not any — if I love yuh now, I'll love yuh always, an' don't yuh forget it. I ain't no kid."

"How old are you?"

"Twenty-eight."

"Twenty-eight. Well, well, who'd 'a' thought it? Regular Methuselah, aren't you?"

"Nun — no, I dunno about that."

"Middle-aged then. We'll be charitable and call it that. And you were askin' me to be reasonable a while since, weren't you? All right, I will be. As a prospective husband, have you anythin' besides yourself and your nerve to offer a bride?"

"Ain't I enough?"

"Not for me. How large is your ranch? How many calves do you brand in the spring?"

"Now you're talkin' scandiloovious, an' I ain't no squarehead. Ranch! Calves! Ha-ha, an' a couple o' hees. I said be reasonable, ma'am."

"It's yourself and the nerve then. I was thinkin' it might be that. I'm afraid it won't do, Mister Methuselah. I'm a hearty eater. I like to be sure of my food. No, no, it won't do. You'll have to take your honest heart elsewhere."

"Nary a take. I'm stickin' till you change your mind."

"Just hold your breath till I do, my gay young friend. Why, you poor conceited fool of a pilgrim, I wouldn't marry you if you were the last man on earth. You might as well drag it so far's I'm concerned."

"But you ain't the only one concerned," objected Red Kane, meeting her hard smile with his cheerful grin. "You keep forgettin' me alla time. I'm gonna marry you, maybe not to-day or to-morrow, but some day. It don't make a bit o' differ how much you say, what you say or how you say it — she's settled. Yo're gonna marry me, just as shore as the Lord made li'l hoptoads, an' don't you forget it."

"Whether I want to or not?" A sardonic devil leaped and danced in the depths of her black eyes.

"You'll want to," he told her confidently.

She laughed a laugh that matched her former smile in hardness. Suddenly her face fell sober.

"I suppose I'll have to listen to you," said she. "You were very decent about bringin' dad in and you helped me set the rib. I owe you somethin' for that."

Red Kane went fiery beneath the tan.

"You don't mean that," he said quietly. "You know I ain't lookin' for pay. An' you don't have to listen to me. I'll shut up for now, but I'm comin' round later."

"It's a free country," she put in.

"'Cause if I don't," he continued, "it's a safe bet somebody else will, an' I'm aimin' to be the somebody my own self."

"I've seen men here and there," she observed dispassionately. "Some were good and some were not, a few pleased me and more didn't, and that means quite a jag of 'em first and last, but of all the he-mortals I ever ran across not a single dozen ever made me so mad as you do. Good-by."

She turned a straight back on him and slammed the kitchen door in his face.

"She'll come round," he told himself with an assuredness he was far from feeling. "What did I tell her I was gonna marry her for? Red, yuh poor idjit, you've shore spilt the coffee-pot this time." He smiled a one-sided smile, and rubbed an elbow with the palm of his hand. "She hadn't oughta asked me about my intentions," he continued aloud. "Nawsir, she shore oughtn't to done that."

He regarded the closed door with half-shut eyes, teetering the while on his high heels.

"I wonder now," he mused. "I wonder — "

He dodged sidewise and wheeled, for Kansas Casey had clapped him violently on the shoulder.

"Watcha mumblin' an' mutterin' about?" the deputy inquired curiously. "You was havin' a fine powwow with you an' yoreself. Can a gent horn in, or was you desirin' to be private?"

"I was," Red said pointedly, "but I dunno as it's any use goin' on with it now. I like you, Kansas. Take yuh all round, meat, hide, horns, hoofs an' taller, yo're a pretty good jigger. I don't care what folks say, I'll always give yuh a good character. Yore face may be against yuh, but you can't help it. You was born that way, an' — "

"Look here — " Kansas began with heat.

"I'm doin' that," interrupted Red, "an' I can't see that you've changed a bit since yuh went out to that woodpile. If you've done butchered enough kindlin', lean on them two buckets an' sashay over to the spring an' back a few times. This'll be the first honest work y' ever done in yore life, won't it, Kansas? Now, now, Kansas, look out! You'll choke!"

Affecting great anxiety, Red seized Kansas by the shoulders. Kansas, out of deference to the lady who he supposed was in the kitchen, must perforce whisper his opinion of Red. The effort at restraint rendered him

purple. The two, wrestling, waltzed across to the corral. Suddenly Red loosed his hold.

"Hear that," said he, fending off Kansas with both hands.

"What?" queried Kansas, lowering his arms.

"Hosses." Succinctly.

Both listened.

"There, can't yuh hear 'em?" Red demanded impatiently. "Take the cotton out o' yore ears."

"I'll stick my knuckles in yores," Kansas told him amiably. "I hear 'em now. They's a few of 'em shore comin' this way fast an' soon."

"Ten anyway," said Red Kane.

A moment later a bunched group of horsemen appeared on a rise of ground a mile to the west. They were in a tearing hurry, these horsemen, and swept down on the ranch-house, a dusty outfit of sixteen men. They galloped up and skittered to a halt.

It seemed to Red that their manner was suspiciously ostentatious. He watched them curiously. He knew them all. They were men of Farewell, every one. They nodded or spoke to him and Kansas, and it was evident that they found the presence of Kansas Casey sufficiently displeasing.

"I suppose you've arrested him, Kansas," said the leader, one Carlson, a short and thickset person with a sweeping brown mustache.

Deep disappointment lay heavily in the tones of Mr. Carlson.

Kansas Casey opened innocent eyes. He stared hard at Carlson and the outfit at his horse's tail.

"Arrested who?" said Kansas Casey.

"Why, this man Lorimer."

Red Kane puckered his forehead. Was it possible that Carlson knew of the notice from Lang County?

"What do I wanna arrest him for?" asked Kansas

Casey. "Not that it's any of yore business whether I arrest him or not."

"O' course not," said Carlson smoothly, and he smiled a crooked smile. "Law-breakin' is none of our business neither." He looked round at the faces of his followers before adding, "Why would it be? But, if you ain't here to arrest him, what are yuh doin' here?"

"Which again is none of yore business." Kansas did not raise his voice. But it was obvious that he was growing angry.

Carlson nodded. Again he looked about him at his men.

"I guess," said he. "I guess likely. Well, if you ain't gonna do nothin' with this gent Lorimer for robbin' the stage, I guess we will."

"You will?" Kansas said very softly. "You will?"

"Y' bet yuh." Carlson wagged a purposeful head, dismounted and set one hand to his rope-strap.

"I don't see no sheriff in yore bunch," Kansas said.

"No," returned Carlson, "he ain't with us to-day."

"An' if you figure on doin' anythin' rambuctious with that rope, you won't be with us neither," chipped in Red Kane, taking a hand in the conversation for the first time.

Carlson continued to unstrap his rope. He took it down and shook out its coils.

"I don't see nobody round here that's gonna keep me from doin' anythin' I feel like doin'." Carlson stared hardily at Red Kane.

"Think so?" grinned Red. "Well, Mister Man, all you gotta do is open any door in this house."

Carlson laughed harshly and spat. He was not lacking in courage, this Carlson, but he knew that Red Kane was a cold proposition. So was Kansas Casey. Both were excellent shots. He himself, as leader of his crowd, would, should matters come to a crisis, indubitably be the first to die.

"Look here, they's sixteen of us," announced Carlson. "How you gonna stop us? Sixteen to two. Yo're talkin' foolish."

"Then if we're talkin' foolish, what yuh waitin' for?" Kansas Casey inquired shrewdly.

"We don't wanna have to drill you, Kansas," explained Carlson. "Yo're a friend o' ours. So's Red —"

"I ain't," Red Kane interrupted. "Not for one li'l minute I ain't. I ain't friends with no herd o' humans who comes squinchin' round sixteen to one to lynch folks. Yo're a real courageous outfit o' bummers, I'll say that for yuh. Where's the rest o' the town? Don't you know this gent might be armed? Ain't yuh takin' a long chance? I'm only surprised yuh didn't come round at night when yuh could creep up on him asleep, an' — None o' that, Carlson! Stick 'em up, quick!"

Carlson stuck them up and inwardly cursed himself for being so thoughtless as to go after his gun against a man like Red Kane.

"A derringer is shore handy," Red observed to the world at large without removing his eyes from the face of Carlson. "Yuh can carry it right in the palm of yore hand an' nobody'll notice it till the right time. You didn't, did yuh, Carlson?"

Carlson's reply was more than vigorous.

"Guess now I must 'a' hurt Carlson's li'l pink feelin's," mourned Red. "I'm sorry. It's all right about you gents in behind there, but if anybody goes a-draggin' out his artillery thinkin' to down me when I ain't lookin', Carlson here will be sorrier than me. This derringer is fifty caliber an' double-barreled," he added matter-of-factly.

"Lemme do this, boys," pleaded Carlson to his nervous henchmen.

"Why not lemme?" suggested Kansas Casey. "Red, yo're too previous. Carlson, so are you. An' as for the

rest o' you gents, they won't be no lynchin' here. They's a mighty sick man in this house, an' I want yuh to let him alone."

The kitchen door at Red's back opened. The girl stood in the doorway.

"If you boys intend to do any shootin'," she said quietly, "I wish you'd go away off some'ers. Your friskin' round out here has got him all excited. He can't hear what you're sayin', and naturally he's curious. Come some other time, gentlemen, when he's better."

She nodded, smiled brightly upon them all and closed the door.

Red, at the sound of the girl's voice, had tucked the derringer out of sight beneath his armpit. Carlson had lowered his hands and clasped them with as much ease as he could muster behind his head. He fondly trusted that the girl would think that this was a natural pose. Too late, when she was gone, he remembered that he should have removed his hat. The others had swept theirs off. Most of them were grinning idiotically and settling neckhandkerchiefs with great care. Pretty women are few and far between in the broken lands.

But all was not well yet. Four members of the lynching party, while imitating their comrades in the removal of their hats, were not overjoyed at the turn of affairs. The bumptiousness of Red Kane stuck in their gullets. They did not like him anyway. They never had. Fresh jigger, like all that Bar S crowd.

Durkin, Cox, Lenn and Dill, knowing each other very well, looked sidelong at the man who had outfaced them. Kansas Casey had been likewise in the outfacing. But that was different quite. For Kansas Casey was a deputy sheriff.

Red Kane, unconscious of their scrutiny, shifted his feet. A gleam of yellow showed dully in the trampled grass beside his boot soles. It was fate that the afore-

mentioned quartette should have been watching Red at that moment.

"Looks like a gold piece there," remarked Durkin in a voice unnecessarily loud.

"Right by yore foot — the left one," said Lenn.

Red stooped. There was a twenty-dollar gold piece without doubt. He picked it up. Another caught his eye. Then a third and a fourth. He could see no others. Red chinked the four gold pieces in the palm of his hand.

"An' me standin' right over 'em an' never knowed it," he marveled.

"They musta fell out of his pockets when we unloaded him off the buckboard," said Kansas Casey.

"Out of his pockets, huh?" repeated Durkin. Eight hundred dollars o' the money stole from the stage passengers was in double eagles, did yuh know that?"

"What of it?" demanded the truculent Red. "What's that got to do with these here four, Durkin?"

But Durkin merely grinned and patted the brass horn of his saddle. His three friends smiled evilly. Carlson looked troubled. He could have wished himself elsewhere. He was not a bad chap at heart, and he had seen the nester's daughter. One of Carlson's friends, a gentleman named Riley, voiced Carlson's own thought.

"After all," observed the gentleman named Riley, "we can't tell nothin' by them there double eagles. They's lots of eagles. The gov'ment makes 'em by the bar'l."

"Alla same, this had oughta be looked into," declared Cox.

"I guess we'll have to search the house after all," the deputy pronounced. "'S no use hollerin', Red, it's gotta be done. Don't mean nothin' anyway. It's only a formal'ty."

Kansas Casey turned and knocked upon the kitchen door.

CHAPTER SEVEN

PUBLIC OPINION

"WHY didn't yuh knock that gun out of his hand!" complained Cox, tenderly holding a bandaged forearm.

"How'd I know he had a gun?" angrily demanded Durkin. "I thought he was hurt bad from what Kansas said — busted ribs an' such — couldn't make a gun-play."

"He shore made one," said Carlson, building himself a cigarette. "An' his second shot tickled my ear so close I felt the breeze. If this Lorimer gent is as active as this when he's sick, yuh can fry me if I wanna fuss with him without one awful good reason when he's well."

"That's me," chimed in Riley. "He shore is a cracker with a gun. Why, I was watchin' him when they's a flash-flash an' a couple o' bangs from his bunk, an' Coxy's nicked. Wonder he didn't down yuh, Coxy. Bet he would if he hadn't been sort of under the weather. That second shot was for you too."

"I know it," grunted Cox, "—— —— his soul. I'll get him yet."

"You be sure an' bushwhack him then," advised Red Kane sarcastically, "or what'll be left o' you won't float in water. Y' oughta had better sense, Cox, than to offer to bet Durkin the stolen money was under the floor in a bull-beller yuh could hear over in Farewell. An' you standin' not ten feet from his bunk. No wonder he took a shot at yuh. Don't blame him. Serve yuh right. Yo're a fool, Cox, whether yuh like it or not."

"This here's my right hand," suggested Cox, "or I'd talk to yuh."

"I'll be round when it gets well," Red answered him promptly.

"Alla same, s'pose we didn't find no money besides the silver in his clo'es," said Durkin, giving Red his closest attention. "I'll bet he did help hold up that stage, an' I wouldn't be surprised none if he knowed somethin' about the express robbery."

"Yo're a liar!" cried partisan Red on general principles and reached for his gun.

His clutching fingers had barely touched the wood of the butt when a Winchester cracked behind him, burning powder grains stung his ear, and Durkin, a ragged hole in the front of his hat, gave way at the knees and toppled backward.

Red Kane, one hand over his burnt ear, turned. There in the doorway of the ranch-house stood the nester's daughter. Her black eyes were blazing. Her lips were parted, showing clenched white teeth. In her hands she held a rifle. From the muzzle a curl of greasy gray smoke spiraled lazily upward.

The spectators did not move. Some looked at the prostrate Durkin with the blood trickling from beneath his hat. Some looked at the girl where she stood motionless, her smoking rifle slanting across her tense figure. The girl stared at the body of the man she had shot. Slowly she passed the tip of a pink tongue across and across her tight-drawn lips. She laid the rifle level and clicked in a fresh cartridge.

The nester's daughter raised her head. Each man of the scattered crowd felt that her smoldering gaze was fixed upon him personally. They shifted their feet and hands and wriggled embarrassed shoulders. Even Kansas Casey and Red Kane were not immune to the general feeling of unease.

"Does anybody else think there's any stolen money around here, and does anybody else think my father is a road agent?" Her voice was quite clear, and it carried an edge like a razor.

No one made reply. Somehow it seemed that no reply was necessary. The silence was thick enough to cut. It endured while one so moved might saddle a horse. Then Kansas Casey cleared a self-conscious throat. Kansas was not clear in his mind whether the case was one of murder or justifiable homicide. Justice in that country was a broad-minded lady, but Kansas Casey was a conscientious officer. God knows he always tried to do the proper thing.

"Ma'am," said Kansas Casey, taking off his hat to the girl, "I wish you'd gimme yore word not to leave the county till the sheriff — he's coroner — sits on this case. He'd oughta get back from Marysville inside a week — which I shore hope he does, if not sooner, 'cause I dunno how Durkin's gonna keep this weather. You see, ma'am," he continued persuasively, "me bein' here when you — when it happened — we gotta be legal about it so's it'll look right. But I don't guess they'll be no trouble. The jury'll be square about it. They always are. Most likely they'll bring it in suicide or the like o' that. So if you'll just gimme yore word, ma'am, like I say — "

The supposed corpse chose this moment to move a leg and utter a lusty groan. Later it was told abroad that the gentleman named Riley, who was standing at Durkin's head, jumped six feet. But then everybody was more or less startled. Kansas Casey was so surprised that he bit his tongue. It was the resourceful Red who first recovered himself.

"I knowed he wasn't dead all along," declared that superior person. "Dead gents always fall on their faces — always. It's a rule. An' Durkin fell flat on his

back, an' nobody noticed it except me, which is nothin' to wonder at — considerin'."

In this wise and with these words Red Kane covered his bounding feeling of relief — relief that his goddess had not killed a man. He approved and admired her fighting spirit; yet, when it came to a public killing, he preferred to take it upon his own soul. For Red's life in the cow country had been unable to completely uproot the home-grown doctrine that woman's sphere is the porch and fireside.

No one paid any attention to Red or what he was saying. Mr. Durkin was the center of attraction. His friend Mr. Lenn, a dark-faced devil in a red-and-white checked shirt, eased Mr. Durkin's head upon his knee and took off Mr. Durkin's hat.

"Ow! Wow!" Mr. Durkin's yelp would not have disgraced a tortured coyote. "That's my head!" continued Mr. Durkin passionately. "Tryin' to scalp me, yuh thumb-handed idjit! My skull's fractured. I know it is!"

"No such luck," Red Kane told him, dropping on one knee at his side. "You was lookin' for trouble, an' you got it. Y' always did talk too much. This'll learn yuh to keep yore fool mouth shut. Hold still, can't yuh? How can I see how much yo're hurt with you wigglin' all over like a worm on a hook. There now, Rum, yo're in luck. Told yuh yuh wasn't damaged none to speak of. The lead only tore all the skin and hair off the top o' yore head. The bone's only grooved a li'l bit.

"Here, shove across with the water, Pickles. Don't pour it in his eye! Over his head! That's it. Why couldn't yuh done it in the first place 'stead of wastin' near all of it? Git me some more, will yuh? Hold still, Durkin. Too bad yuh can't see how fine I'm a-doin' this. You'd appreciate it. Look at it, gents. A regular sawbones couldn't 'a' fixed it up no better. This'll be as good

a job as Kansas done on Coxy's arm. Kansas, you bust open a cartridge an' gimme the powder. I wanna rub it on to stop the bleedin'."

"Don'tcha put no powder on my head!" commanded Durkin, striving to writhe out from beneath the ministering hands of Red Kane. "The blue'll never come out. I don't wanna look like a warwhoop in paint."

"Shut up! Got the powder, Kansas? Don't you go frettin' now, Rum, this here powder may hurt, but it'll shore stop the bleedin' an' keep out lockjaw. You don't wanna get lockjaw, do yuh? You wouldn't never talk nor eat nor nothin'. Think o' that, Rum, an' be happy. Any gent got a clean handkerchief?"

Red finally had the wounded man bandaged to suit him — Red — if not the patient, and rose to his feet.

"There," he said, slapping his palms together as he had seen a surgeon do on a certain occasion in Piegan City, "that's done. An', Rum, yuh won't never have to brush yore hair again. Yuh'll always have a part right in the middle. Save yuh a lot of trouble, that will."

The information did not wonderfully cheer Mr. Durkin. He lay on the broad of his back and regarded Red Kane darkly.

"Yeah," he grated, "I'm shore obliged to yuh, Red."

"I'll bet he's obliged most to death," Riley whispered into Carlson's appreciative ear. "He'll be Red's friend for life, Durkin will."

"Yeah," nodded Carlson, "an' he won't never forget Red's talkin' up to him thataway. Durkin can't stand nobody tellin' him the truth about himself. Hurts his feelin's. He's got right tender feelin's," he added with a short chuckle.

"If he's got any sense, Rum won't pamper them feelin's too much, not if he wants to keep on minglin' in our midst. I notice he sort o' let slide Red's callin' him a liar."

"He'll wait. Rum Durkin's got the patience of a cougar. If he can't get what he wants one way, he'll figure out another."

"I know he ain't to be trusted," Riley admitted thoughtfully. "Too bad Red didn't have time to down him."

"Red will yet," asserted Carlson confidently. "He's all right, even if he did make me stick my hands up. Y' can't help but like the —— fool."

"Y' ain't the only one likes him," grinned Riley. "Look yonder."

Carlson looked. The men from Farewell were catching up their horses. Durkin, very wobbly in the saddle, his three friends in close attendance, was already starting off on the back trail. The clear space between the ranch-house and the corral was deserted by everyone save Red Kane. The puncher, his back toward the house, was tightening cinches twenty feet from the kitchen door. The nester's daughter was looking at him through the kitchen window.

Red turned, and the girl dodged out of sight. He took a step toward the house, hesitated; then he suddenly wheeled back to his horse, slapped the reins up across its neck, and mounted. He rode away by himself without a backward glance.

"Her lookin' thataway don't mean nothin'," whispered the sophisticated Carlson, who read more romantic novels than any twelve men in the territory. "You can't tell what a woman means by her looks nohow, but you can gamble she shore don't mean what yuh think she means no matter what. If yuh know what I mean."

"I don't," said Riley promptly. "Not for a minute. But alla same I wish she'd look at me thataway once. Just once. That's all I'd ask. I ain't talked to a real pretty girl in two year an' a half. I guess now I'll go ask her for a drink."

Riley set his hat straight and marched up to the kitchen door and knocked. Carlson, with a most peculiar smile, settled his shoulders against the corral stockade and waited.

The door opened and the girl appeared. Riley took off his hat, achieved a head-bob in lieu of a bow and said something. The girl said something and closed the door. Riley pulled on his hat and strode directly to where his horse was tied. Riley's face was very red. Carlson's peculiar smile deepened.

"Whatsa matter, 'Irish'?" he asked when he had joined his friend. "Ain't yuh thirsty no more?"

"No, I ain't," Riley averred with biting emphasis. "She ain't so awful good-lookin' when yuh stand close to her," he continued with elaborate calm of manner. "Skin's kind o' coarse-like, an' her eyes is just a li'l bit crossed."

"Yeah," said Carlson, "I guess likely. I dunno — my ears ain't so awful sharp — but I thought I heard her tell yuh they was a dipper at the spring an' to leave her alone. O' course, I'm only sayin' I thought she said that. I didn't mean to listen, Irish."

"No, you wouldn't, an' it don't matter anyway, an' it don't matter what she said neither. I don't think she's pretty a-tall, an' yuh can stick a pin in that, old-timer. Get yore bone-rack an' come along before we get wet. Look at them clouds. Gonna rain, I guess. It *is* rainin', an' I left my slicker behind."

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE BROKEN KNIFE

"My Lord, Piney," exclaimed Red Kane, stopping his horse beside the blacksmith shop, "ain't yuh never gonna get that wheel made? I ain't aimin' to spend the rest o' my sweet young life in this village of bushwhackers, I ain't. Here you are pitchin' hoss-shoes like you hadn't a care in the wicked world an' not one single spoke finished, I'll bet."

"Yo're a heap wrong, Red," declared the blacksmith, scratching his head with grimy fingers. "I got all o' six spokes ready, but I done dropped my spoke-shave an' nicked it, an'—"

"An' instead o' grabbin' the grindstone an' grindin' out the nick, yuh had to start in pitchin' hoss-shoes with that mis'able scoundrel, Bill Lainey. Howdy, Bill, don't yuh know pitchin' hoss-shoes is dangerous business for a gent o' yore size? Yo're likable to strain somethin' besides yore suspenders. Why, Bill, I dunno when I seen you takin' so much exercise all at once. Whatsa matter, tryin' to lose yoreself flesh or somethin'?"

The remarks to Bill Lainey's address were delivered in a hearty roar that carried well across and beyond the street, even as Red Kane had intended.

"For Gawd's sake!" wheezed Lainey imploringly, flapping fat hands at Red, "don't yell so loud! My wife'll hear yuh! Shut up, Red, will yuh?"

Like a horizontal jack-in-the-box, a sharp-faced woman popped head and shoulders out of one of the side win-

dows of the hotel diagonally across the street. The sharp-faced woman fixed sharper eyes on the fat hotel-keeper.

"You Bill Lainey!" she cried in a voice that matched to perfection her face and eyes. "You Bill Lainey! You lazy good-for-nothin' lummox! If you can stay awake long enough to play hoss-shoes with that drunken sot of a blacksmith, who ain't fit company for a Injun hound to associate with, much less a white man, yo're strong enough to fetch me water an' wood. You hear me, you fat scalawag! Slide over here instanter, or I'll shore search out the broom an' pat yore face with it!"

"There," sighed Bill Lainey, hitching up his trousers, "I knowed I'd have a mighty run o' bad luck if I come over here instead o' sleepin' in my chair like I oughta. I knowed it. You hadn't oughta talked so loud, Red. I'm a-comin', Lize. I'm a-comin'."

Bill Lainey waddled off across the street. Red Kane winked at Piney Jackson and slouched sidewise in the saddle.

"C'mon now, you drunken sot of a blacksmith," urged Red, "get to work. You've heard that lady tell yuh what yuh are, only she didn't say half enough. She dunno yuh like I do, y' old reeprobate."

"Gawdamighty," murmured the blacksmith, "she shore can whirl her tongue like you can a rope. I wouldn't be married to her for a good deal, I wouldn't."

"Not while yore own wife's alive anyhow. That wheel, Piney, huh? You recollect we was talkin' about a wheel, — one o' them round things with a tire an' a felly an' a hub an' lots o' spokes. Folks use 'em on wagons an' buckboards quite a lot. Wheels thataway make 'em run easier seemin'ly. How about it, Piney?"

"Yo're as bad as Mis' Lainey. I'll git to work immediate just to keep yuh from talkin' me deef. Yo're a fright of an outfit, you fellers. Y' always want yore

jobs done at once if not sooner. A feller don't get no chance to rest a-tall. All right, all right, I won't fool round another minute. Say, ain't that Old Salt ridin' in on the trail?"

"Shore is, an' maybe he won't have somethin' to say himself."

When Mr. Saltoun, Red Kane's employer and owner of the Bar S ranch, came opposite the blacksmith shop, the grindstone within was bravely squealing and the puncher was rolling a cigarette. Mr. Saltoun saw more than the puncher. His brows drew together. He swung his horse toward the cowboy.

"Howdy, Red," said Mr. Saltoun, reining in in front of the blacksmith shop. "We've been sort o' expectin' you back the last four days."

"I know it," Red returned placidly. "I've been wantin' to come back, but I had to wait for the buckboard."

"The buckboard! Whadda yuh mean?"

"The buckboard is bust. I gotta wait for Piney to fix her up. He's workin' on a wheel now, I guess. Yonder she lays — over by the freight wagon."

Mr. Saltoun regarded the battered vehicle while the veins in his forehead swelled alarmingly. The buckboard was the apple of one eye. The mule-team was the apple of the other.

"Are the mules hurt?" he inquired with terrible calmness.

"Not a hair twisted the wrong way," was the cheering reply. "They're over in Lainey's corral eatin' their heads off."

"How'd it happen?"

"Stage busted a axle, went on the rampage an' tore the world apart round here for a spell. Yore buckboard was part o' the tear."

"The stage busted up my buckboard?"

"I'm sayin' so."

"They'll ante up for it, by ——! I'll show them they can't smash my property all to —— an' not pay good an' plenty! Where's that Buck Saylor? I'll tell him a thing or two! Where'll I find Buck?"

"There he goes now," said Red, glancing past Mr. Saltoun. "Slid out behind the office some'ers. Guess he musta seen yuh comin'."

Mr. Saltoun, breathing fire and brimstone, spurred away to head off Buck Saylor, and Red Kane leaned back against his cantle and laughed till the tears ran down his cheeks. Poor Buck! Old Salt would surely hang his hide on the fence.

Red Kane picked up his reins and jogged after Old Salt. The latter had caught Buck Saylor at the corral gate.

"But it ain't my fault!" Buck was protesting when Red arrived. "How could I help the axle bustin'? I'm askin' yuh, how could I help it? You act like it was all my fault!"

"I'm gamblin' you was careless or somethin'—you an' yore company. Rotten old wore-out stages! Why don't yuh loosen up an' buy a new outfit or some dope once in a while so's yore axles'll have a chance? Yo're gonna pay for that buckboard, you an' yore company, I tell yuh those! You just write out my claim right now this minute for two hundred dollars, an'—"

"Two hundred dollars!" Buck Saylor flung outraged hands aloft. "Two hundred dollars! Why, that squeak on wheels o' yores wasn't worth three whoops an' a —— in counterfeit money. Besides, yo're havin' it repaired. Piney Jackson is fixin' it up all same new. I seen it down at his blacksmith shop. Two hundred dollars nothin'! I'm lookin' out for my company, I am, an' I won't let yuh put in no such claim as that."

"What?" bawled Mr. Saltoun, his predatory profile

shooting forward. "Do I hear you say you won't lemme do this an' that? You won't lemme! You poor coot, you'll do just what I tell yuh in this deal. Yo're lookin' out for yore company, huh? Who was it bought them cayuses from me for twenty wheels apiece an' then resold 'em to the company for stage hosses at forty dollars a throw? Who was it, huh? You think I don't know nothin, about that li'l business? Well, I do, you bet, an' you can gamble yore company will know any time I get ready to tell 'em. An' you sit up there an' blat how yo're a-lookin' out for the company! You got a nerve like a hoss tellin' me what to do!"

Buck Saylor leaned back against the corral gate. His smile was a pitiable thing as he strove to appear jaunty and affable.

"Them hosses I sold the company was just a joke," he explained, "just a li'l joke. You wouldn't go for to say nothin' about it, I know yuh wouldn't. You'n me have always been old friends, Saltoun."

"I dunno whether the company would see the point o' the joke as easy as you do, Buck. They was fifty hosses in that bunch, which made one thousand even for you. Do yuh think the company would appreciate a thousand dollars worth o' joke even from such a funny feller as you are? Yuh'd better make out that two hundred an' fifty dollar claim for me, hadn't yuh, Buck?"

"You said two hundred awhile ago."

"I changed my mind. I'm liable to do that when folks keep me waitin'. Are you gonna write out that claim without wastin' any more time, or will I have to change my mind again?"

"The company won't never allow no such claim as that, I know they won't."

"I know they will 'cause yo're gonna recommend over yore own signature in that claim that they settle for two hundred an' fifty. When they see how their own agent,

Mister Buck Saylor, feels about it, they'll believe him 'an pay it. See how it is?"

"I see," Buck Saylor groaned in deep bitterness of spirit. "All right, come along."

Accompanied by Mr. Saltoun, Buck Saylor returned to the express office. Red Kane did not follow. He dismounted, stepped to where Mr. Saltoun's horse had stood and picked up an object that had been kicked free of the ground by the wheeling horse.

The object was a dusty two-bladed jack-knife, not a Barlow but the modern blade of Swedish manufacture. The larger blade was broken off two inches from the tang. Red tapped the knife on his heel to rid it of dust, and raised it to his mouth to blow out what remained of the territory's fertile soil. Now he perceived that which had not met his eye at first — a thin silver coin caught between the small blade and the side of the knife. With his fingers he endeavored to pluck out the coin. Vain endeavor. The coin would not pluck. It was wedged fast. He tried his good front teeth and narrowly missed cracking one.

"This here short bit is plumb stubborn," he muttered, pulling out and opening his own pocket knife.

With the blade of this implement he contrived to lever the coin from its resting-place.

The little piece of silver money was a dime, the short bit of that hard-working couple, well and favorably known to all and sundry as Two-Bits. The dime, pierced near the edge by a small hole, pocket-piece fashion, bore a date eleven years old on the reverse. On the obverse the initials B. L., in deep, rough scratches, sprawled across the figure of the seated Liberty.

"B. L.," murmured Red Kane, and with the ball of his thumb he rubbed clear the little nickel shield riveted on one side of the stained handle.

There were letters upon the shield too. They had been

scratched in even more deeply than in the coin. They were the same letters, B. L.

"I wonder if Lorimer's front name is Bill," mused Red Kane.

He dropped knife and dime into a vest pocket and stooped to rake the earth with his fingers at the spot where he had found the knife. He was hunting for the missing portion of the larger knife blade.

"That break was new," he reflected. "I'd like to know what the owner of the knife was tryin' to cut."

He did not find the broken blade, and he stood up and looked about him with keen half-closed eyes.

"Right there is where they loaded the safe aboard the wagon," he told himself. "An' yonder's the express-office door. A feller scamperin' round promiscuous between them two places could easy lose the jack-knife where I found her."

"Oh, Red, come here a shake, will yuh?"

It was Mr. Saltoun who was calling to him from the express-office. Red slouched to the side doorway and entered.

"Yeah?" he said inquiringly.

"I just want yuh to tell Buck what was in the hind end of the buckboard," explained Mr. Saltoun. "They must be somethin' else we can charge the company for."

"Only a few airtights," said Red. "They wasn't hurt none. Dented, that's all. I hadn't loaded up yet."

"You'd oughta," was Mr. Saltoun's reproof. "But I suppose I gotta be satisfied."

"Yuh shore gotta," Buck exclaimed in sarcasm. "My ——, Salt, I dunno what yo're raisin' cows for. Yo're wastin' yore life."

"Think so?" Mr. Saltoun asked dryly. "I might be sellin' hosses to the company, mightn't I? Never thought o' that."

Buck made no comment but chewed the end of his pen

with a wry face. Mr. Saltoun pulled at his mustache and rubbed a stubbly chin.

"I guess we'll let it go at that," he sighed. "Lessee her, Buck."

Buck handed him the paper and Mr. Saltoun read it through carefully not once but three times. Scotch blood did not flow in his veins for nothing.

"This'll do fine," said Mr. Saltoun. "Give us yore pen. Red, I wish you'd sign this, too. It'll make it stronger. Now, you Buck, slap on yore notary public seal — sling on all the dog they is."

Dog! Red looked up quickly. What had become of Buck Saylor's dogs?

"Djever find yore dogs, Buck?" he asked.

"Never did. Dunno where they are. They never did come home after that night. Aw, I guess they was poisoned all right. They'd 'a' come home if they was alive."

Mr. Saltoun carefully blotted the signed and sealed report, and slid it into one of Buck Saylor's official envelopes.

"I'll mail this myself," he announced, tapping his front teeth with the corner of the envelope and winking at Buck.

"You don't trust me," said the latter reproachfully.

"Shore I do," declared Mr. Saltoun. "Trust you a mile. Shore. Why not? It's only yore memory I got doubts of. You know yoreself, Buck, yo're awful forgetful, so yuh needn't get riled nohow. C'mon over to the Starlight, you an' Red, an' have a li'l smile."

"In a minute," said Buck, brightening visibly at the invitation. "Soon's I write out my daily report, I'm with yuh."

Mr. Saltoun and Red went outside to wait. There was a bench flanking the side door. They seated themselves upon the bench. Mr. Saltoun sat at the end near the door. Slumping down limply, he leaned his left shoulder against

the door jamb. He felt a sharp jab through the flannel of his shirt. He turned, rubbing his shoulder, and found a piece of steel sticking in the wood of the jamb.

"Fool trick leavin' knife blades where they can stick into people," said he and tried to pull it out with his fingers.

But the knife had been driven in deeply. Not more than a half-inch of it protruded.

"Maybe it ain't a knife blade," hazarded Red casually.

"Shore it is. It's got the li'l notch in it for yore finger-nail so's yuh can open it easy. Think I don't know a knife blade when I see it? Say, Buck, why don't yuh pick the knife blades out of yore door jambs?"

"Knife blade? What knife blade?" Buck, inky pen in inkier fingers, came to the door.

"There," said Mr. Saltoun, pointing.

Instantly Buck Saylor became active. He dropped his pen, rummaged through the cluttered contents of a toolbox beneath the office table and returned with a pair of pliers.

Red watched with calculating interest as the express agent pulled out the knife blade.

"I remember now," said Buck Saylor, "hearin' one o' them thieves cussin' how he'd busted his knife. This must be the blade. It's a clue."

"Har! Har!" Red's laugh was deeply contemptuous. "All you gotta do is find the gent who owns the rest o' the knife."

"Well," returned the agent, "it'll help, maybe. You never can tell."

"Yuh never can," grinned Red. "Lessee that blade."

Red took the blade to a front window as if to give it the benefit of more light. Buck returned to his report. Red, his back to the agent, fished from his pocket the knife he had found. Without attracting the slightest attention from the absorbed agent he managed to open the

knife and piece together the two parts of the broken blade. They fitted exactly.

Red's eyebrows straightened in a frown; then he smiled briefly and unobtrusively returned the jack-knife to his pocket. He remained at the window, looking into the street and juggling the broken blade in the palm of his hand.

"She's a queer world," he said aloud at the end of three minutes' silent contemplation of life on Main Street.

"Huh?" Buck Saylor abstractedly looked up from his work.

"Nothin'. I was just talkin'. Here's yore knife blade, Buck."

The bit of steel tinkled down on the table, and Red Kane went outside and joined his employer on the bench.

CHAPTER NINE

LANPHER

"I WANT the 88's money!" Lanpher stated in no uncertain tones.

"Yuh'll have to take it out in wantin' then," Buck Saylor yawned indifferently, only too happy to show the world without that he was not to be bluffed by the 88 manager.

He even winked brazenly at Mr. Saltoun, who, with Red Kane and as many of the world without as could crowd in, fairly filled the express office.

"The company will have to pay," cried Lanpher, who had observed the wink, "an' don't you forget it!"

"They will not," was the prompt retort. "The ten thousand wasn't insured."

"What?" Lanpher screeched.

"I said yore money wasn't insured." Buck leaned back in his chair, thumbs hooked in the armholes of his vest, enjoying to the full the effect of his statement on Lanpher.

"Not insured!" Lanpher's skin went green beneath the tan.

"Cheer up, Lanpher," urged the marshal. "Whadda you care? You won't lose nothin'. You hadn't given no receipt for the money, had yuh? Well, then, the party sendin' yuh the coin will have to stand the loss."

"An' that's my company — the folks that own the ranch. They was sendin' me the money to buy cows with. An' now it's gone. Somethin's gotta be done.

Buck, even if that money wasn't insured, what right you got to sit round like a bump on a log with my money flittin' Gawd knows where? 'Sno use tellin' me yo're sorry. What do I care whether yo're sorry or not? It don't get my money back. An' I want it back. You hear me! Yo're a fine express agent, lettin' them bandits prance down on yuh an' tie yuh all up. Why don't yuh do somethin', huh? Tell me that. Why don't yuh do somethin'?"

"Why don't I do somethin'?" bawled Buck, red-faced and temperish. "Why don't I do somethin'? Which I did do somethin'. Which we all did somethin'. We—"

And Buck went on to tell of what had been done in quest of the stolen money.

Lanpher, gnawing his thin, protruding upper lip, listened in silence. When Buck ceased speaking, the ratlike countenance of the 88 manager was mottled by an ugly wrath.

"That —— nester!" he burst out, sliding round in his chair to face the assemblage. "He come through my ranch, an' I warned him to keep away from this country. I told him he'd be sorry for his health if he fooled round these parts. An' he's throwed down by Sweetwater, has he? An' allows he's gonna ranch it, does he? Ranch it nothin'. We don't want no such ranchers round here. What happens soon as he comes, huh? What happens, gents? The express office is robbed, the safe an' express box full o' money is packed off — fifty thousand dollars, gents — an' the stage is held up. Don't tell me this nester had nothin' to do with it. I seen him, an' he looks like a criminal. An' he wears two guns. What's he want two guns for if he's straight? I tell yuh he knows somethin' about what's goin' on, an' yuh can stick a pin in that."

"Y'betcha!" said the worthy Mr. Lenn, Mr. Durkin's

boon comrade. "I knowed from the start that nester was a bad actor."

"Shore!" corroborated Mr. Dill, known as Pickles among his associates. "I wanted to hang him," he added virtuously.

"Who gave you license to stretch people?" rapped out Red Kane, unable to contain himself longer. "Anybody'd think you was the sheriff. You an' a lot o' gents like you are just too handy with a rope till it comes to workin' with it for forty a month, an' then you get a lame arm or a misery in yore stummick."

"Nemmine about who gimme license," was the limping return of Pickles Dill. "I wanna see justice done, an' I ain't the only one wants to see it neither."

"Yeah," sneered Red. "They's quite a bunch of you fellers, but so far yore mixin' in to shove justice along hasn't helped yuh a whole lot! Take Durkin now. How's his head? An' Cox. Can he use his arm comfortable yet? You can easy see how it is, Pickles. A gent wants to be mighty careful how he slams round helpin' out justice. Whadda you guess?"

Red Kane looked hard at Pickles Dill. The men surrounding the latter felt an immediate distaste for his intimate vicinity and moved elsewhere. Pickles was not a coward, — that is, with most men he was brave enough. But he was not brave enough to join issue with Red Kane. Taking a chance was one thing. But going after his gun against Red Kane would not be even taking a chance. It would be plain, unadorned suicide, — that species of self-destruction which leads the friends of the deceased to remark, "The poor fool. Didn't he know no better?"

Pickles Dill refused the fence with all the dignity he could squeeze out.

"We all got our opinions o' what's what," said Pickles Dill.

"Which is one right sensible answer," was Red Kane's endorsement.

"But it don't get nowhere," put in Lanpher, who should have known better.

"Oh, yes," said Red Kane softly, his red hair bristling under his hat. "Oh, yes. It don't get nowhere. Is they any particular place you was wantin' it to go?"

"Are you tryin' to shield this here nester?" Thus the 88 manager evaded one question by asking another.

"Shield him from what? What's he done that I gotta shield him from? Tell me what's he done?"

"If this Lorimer is one o' the road agents — an' I'm free to admit his driftin' in right before the robberies is mighty suspicious, an' I'll leave it to the rest o' you gents if it ain't — if he is one of 'em like I think an' say, then he'd oughta be stretched, an', if he ain't one of 'em, he's a nester an' out to get rich at our expense like all the rest of 'em. Why, gents, the nesters in this country is gettin' worse than the itch. What they don't steal, they spoil. They're worse'n sheep. We cattlemen gotta stick together, an' —"

"You bet we have," shouted "Spunk" Lenn. "The nesters must go."

"Since when have you been a cattleman, Spunk?" Red Kane desired to know. "Last I heard, an' that was yesterday, you was tendin' bar at the dance-hall. We cattlemen, huh? Yo're funny."

Spunk Lenn subsided like a pricked balloon. Lanpher glared at Red Kane. The latter stared back. Lanpher was the first to drop his eyes.

"You wasn't finished when Spunk stuck his horn in," suggested Red. "Le's hear the rest."

"I was just gonna say that a whole lot o' jiggers have been lynched good an' plenty on less suspicion than they is against this nester. Somebody's gotta be lynched for what's happened."

"Gotta?" chipped in Mr. Saltoun, who detested Lanpher and all his works. "Why gotta?"

"I meant oughta," replied Lanpher with a facial contortion that made him more than ever resemble a rat. "You know yoreself nesters ain't got no business in this country."

"Them Dale folks down there at Moccasin Spring is fine neighbors," continued Mr. Saltoun with a wintry smile. "They was nesters, an' 'Chuck' Morgan married the girl."

Lanpher glowered and gnawed his upper lip. He recalled quite well that Chuck Morgan had married the daughter of the nester Dale. Nor had he forgotten the beating he had suffered at the hands of the Bar S puncher, the Kid's Twin. Still bright in his memory glistened the fact of Mr. Saltoun's having, on that memorable occasion, thrown down on him with a six-shooter. Never, while he lived, would Mr. Lanpher be able to forget these occurrences. But he habitually forced himself — and the forcing was not arduous either — to ignore the little misunderstandings of the past. Lanpher, the artful logician, reasoned that his prime duty was toward his employers. Who was he to allow his personal differences to interfere with their interests, especially when the said differences were with such a reckless, straight-shooting outfit as the Bar S boys?

So Lanpher ceased to glower and gnaw, and achieved a fair imitation of a smile. This deceived neither Red nor Mr. Saltoun. They knew the man inside and out.

"We gotta do somethin'," persisted Lanpher. "You can see that, gents."

"What, for instance?" Red Kane shot the question at him like a bullet.

"Well, now —" hesitated Lanpher.

"Short o' goin' out an' stretchin' a innocent man, you got nothin' to suggest, Lanpher, an' you know it." Red

leveled a lean left forefinger at the 88 manager. "I dunno what yore li'l game is, but I don't like it. You hear me. I don't like it."

"Whadda yuh mean?" Lanpher half rose from his chair.

Chill fear twanged his heartstrings. He did not want to fight, and Red was manifestly striving to provoke him. Pride spurred on the wretched *Bobadil* and clawed at the tags of his frayed courage. Red's smile was as chilly as Lanpher's fear as he replied:

"If you don't know what I mean, guess."

"Le's not do no guessin'," suggested the voice of Kansas Casey who had entered unperceived by Lanpher and his audience. "Whatsa use?" went on the deputy in his most persuasive tone. "We're all li'l friends together, ain't we? Shore we are. Besides, if any gent does start gettin' smoky, I'll do what I can to stop him."

Kansas, talking all the time, pushed his way through the crowd and halted beside Red Kane. He rested his hands on his hips and looked down at Buck Saylor where he sat slouched in his chair behind the table.

"I found yore dogs, Buck," he announced.

"Where was they?" queried the agent, frowning. "Fine kind o' watch-dogs, they was," he added, heavily contemptuous.

"Yuh needn't bother about 'em no more," Kansas told him. "They was both dead."

"Dead!" Buck Saylor cried, leaping out of his chair with such force that it fell over with a crash. "Dead! My dogs dead! Yo're — yo're shore they was my dogs?" he added, doubt and hope combined wrinkling his not over-clean features.

"I'd know yore dogs anywhere," Kansas Casey declared with finality. "I knowed 'em soon's I see 'em spread out under a cedar in that timber south o' Squaw Draw. They was a rope through their collars, an' they'd

been tied to the cedar. They was shot with .45s, by the size of the holes. I couldn't find the bullets. She's kind o' hot weather now, an' anythin' dead don't keep very well, but I judged they'd cashed maybe four days ago."

Buck Saylor did not seem to hear what the deputy was saying. He leaned forward and rested closed fists on the table top.

"I liked them dogs," he ground out, gazing straight before him. "I raised them from pups, I did, an' I taught 'em to roll over an' play dead, an' beg an' bark when they wanted out or in. They was gentle as kittens with me, an' I wouldn't 'a' had nothin' happen to 'em for a whole lot. My dogs! I — Where did yuh say they was, Kansas? Timber south o' Squaw Draw, huh? Gents, yuh'll have to adjourn some'ers else. I gotta go bury them dogs."

From the express office the component parts of the crowd drifted in various directions. In the main they gravitated to the several saloons.

Lanpher stood alone on the sidewalk and watched Kansas Casey shepherding Red Kane and Mr. Saltoun into the Happy Heart. Nobody had asked Lanpher to drink. Nobody, unless ax-grinding was in view, ever did ask him. He was far from being a congenial spirit. He was aware of this and was more pleased thereby than otherwise. Drinking in company carried no appeal. He greatly preferred taking his bottle to bed with him and tippling in solitude.

He went down to the Starlight Saloon and bought two quart bottles — one of corn whisky, the other of rye. These he carried to his horse and packed tenderly in the saddlebags.

He mounted and started homeward, his brain busy with his wrongs. The money consigned to him was gone, and gone for good and all, apparently; because the money

was gone, the cattle deal he had arranged must fall through, and he would lose the bonus of one thousand dollars promised him by his company. One thousand dollars! No wonder Lanpher squirmed as though the saddle-leather burned him. And his old enemy, the Bar S, through Red Kane, had flouted him again.

The Bar S outfit was always picking on him, meddling in his affairs, and trying to make trouble regardless. Why should Red Kane and Mr. Saltoun champion the nester Lorimer? What business was it of theirs, he'd like to know. Nesters had no right to live, the bush-whacking rustlers. Lynching was too good for them, and in particular was it too good for Lorimer, this man who had defied him to his face before his own ranch-house door and sworn he'd take up a homestead wherever he wished. Now it would seem that Lorimer had kept his word.

It was true that Sweetwater Mountain lay not on the 88 range but on that belonging to the Cross-in-a-box. Yet this did not in the least ameliorate Lorimer's offense. Lorimer should have moved on, gone out of the country when ordered so to do. This he had certainly not done. It was too much. It was not to be borne by a ranch manager with a mark to make in the world.

Moreover, the nester probably knew a good deal about the robberies. His arrival and their occurrence could not be fortuitous. No doubt he was the leader of the gang. He had looked capable of almost any villainy. Kansas Casey and that idiotic posse! Lanpher didn't believe they'd half searched the nester's ranch, or properly questioned him either. He wished he'd been there, so he did. He wouldn't have bungled everything.

CHAPTER TEN

"HEY, BOYS, UP GO WE!"

IN the glory of the sunset the 88 cook stood and scratched his shoulder blades against the grateful corner of the cook-shack. As a back-scratcher the corner of a house is only excelled by a post with the bark on. The cook rolled ecstatic eyes heavenward. Tom Dowling, straddling one end of the washbench, gravely watched the cook.

"When I look at you doin' that," remarked Tom Dowling, "I get homesick. I had a hawg once — the cutest li'l feller he was, with a curly tail an' everythin' — an' he'd scratch himself just like that, only, o' course, he never rared up on his hind legs. He always stood on all fours. Cookie, lessee you stand on all fours. Now I won't go there neither. Bill, whadda you think o' Cookie talkin' like that? 'Tain't right, is it?"

"No," replied Bill Allen, the freckle-faced puncher occupying the other end of the washbench, "no, Cookie oughtn't to talk thataway. It's shockin'. Le's teach Cookie manners. You injun up on him in front an' I'll injun round behind him; then, while he's a-kickin' at you, I'll grab him."

The cook retreated rapidly to the cook-shack door, reached within and possessed himself of a stick of stove-wood.

"You lemme be," he advised them earnestly, "you lemme be, or I'll shore whang you with this here. I don't mind foolin', but the last time you done wrastled with me

my watch got stepped on, an' it ain't acted right since. Besides — Aw look, they's Lanpher a-comin' an' I gotta sling his grub together."

The cook pettishly slammed the stove-wood stick into a far corner and began to fill the coffeepot.

"Lanpher is shore feelin' rumdumptious," observed Tom Dowling, squinting at the approaching horseman.

"Sore as a bear about somethin'," said Bill Allen. "Bet he'll have us a-cuttin' wood or hay to-morrow. He always does that when his ol' liver ain't right."

They watched the gloomy Lanpher strip his mount, turn the horse loose and go into the ranchhouse, dragging saddle and saddlebags.

"Got a bottle, maybe two, in them bags," was the sage pronouncement of Tom Dowling. "Look how careful he packed 'em in."

"Shore," assented Bill Allen. "But if we brought a bottle back with us, that would be somethin' else again. I guess so. We'd get our time, y' betcha."

"He carries it good, I'll say that for him," said Tom Dowling. "Outside o' bein' crankier'n usual, you'd never know it next day."

"Alla same, the old tanglefoot is beginnin' to ride him. His nose is startin' to show a li'l red round the edges, an' his appetite ain't what it was. He drinks more coffee, too. I know. I've watched him."

"Here he comes now." Tom Dowling gave his friend a warning nudge.

Lanpher nodded surlily to the two punchers as he crossed from the ranchhouse to the dining room built against the north end of the cook-shack. At the door Lanpher paused and half turned.

"Tom," said he, "you'n Bill better cut wood to-morrow. Take 'Slim' an' Rockwell along to help. Tell the rest of the boys the grass on the flat is high enough to cut an' they might's well get at it."

Lanpher took his morose self on into the dining room and called for coffee and bread and butter. He didn't feel like eating any meat. It was too hot. Helluva country to live in. Man might as well sit in an oven and be done with it. He'd rather, if anybody should ask him.

"Told yuh we'd have to cut wood or hay," grunted Bill Allen. "Our luck is shore out. Listen to him tellin' Cookie how good the coffee is — not. If I was Cookie, I'd tell him where to go just too quick. Cookie's too good-natured with him. Where yuh goin', Tom?"

"I'm gonna get the cross-cut an' hide it where Slim an' Rockwell can't lay their paws on it first," was the answer. "Me, I don't care nothin' about usin' a ax."

In the dining room, a lighted lamp before him, Lanpher sat long over his coffee and bread. He ate no more than two slices of the bread, but he drank seven cups of black coffee. At the meal's end he rolled and lit a cigarette and went back through the soft darkness to the ranch-house.

This night he did not follow custom by going to bed with his bottle. Instead, he seated himself in the chair behind the table he used as a desk, stuck up his feet on the table top and held the bottle in his lap.

He had not lit the lamp. For there were no window shades, and it would never do for the outfit to see him drinking. He utterly failed to realize that what they did not actually know they guessed at quite shrewdly.

Thus he sat solitary in the dark, smoking and drinking. A long slow draw at a cigarette and a slower exhale would be followed by a healthy pull at the bottle-neck. Puff and swallow, puff and swallow, while the hours slid away to the ticking of the alarm clock on the shelf above Lanpher's head.

Now a man with an educated stomach may drink a quart of whisky and become no more than lightly jingled, — provided he takes his time in the business.

Lanpher took his first swallow of corn whisky a few minutes after ten o'clock. He gulped down the last drop in the bottle at half-past one in the morning. Remained the other bottle, that containing the rye.

Lanpher had intended to hold over the second bottle for another evening, but his hand touched its smooth side as he put away the empty. His fingers hesitatingly closed round the neck of the second bottle. Why not crowd two evenings into one and make a regular night of it for once? Why not have one more drink at least? A short swallow, a mere tongue-wetting?

Lanpher gripped the full bottle firmly and carried it with him to his chair.

During the tippling of the first bottle, the sense of ill usage that had afflicted Lanpher since his departure from Farewell had dwindled and died. A pleasant feeling of friendliness for the world at large had taken its place. Even the nester Lorimer and Red Kane were no longer Lanpher's enemies. They had their faults, naturally, but it was a free country, live and let live, bear and forbear — this was the way to get along. Quite so.

But the first drink of the rye made Lanpher consumedly thirsty for another. A second swallow, a third, two gulps in succession, and Lanpher's state of mellow *bonhomie* vanished in a breath. A vile and ugly humor took its place. Which humor grew by degrees viler and uglier.

By three o'clock in the morning the floor of the room was thickly strewn with dead cigarette butts, high tide in the bottle was half-way down the label, and Lanpher was fairly seething with the bitter realization of his wrongs. He hated the Bar S, Old Man Saltoun, Red Kane and the nester — above all Lorimer the nester.

Lanpher set the bottle-neck to his lips. When he took it away, he puffed his cigarette to a bright glow and held it behind the bottle.

"Not more'n three drinks left," he said aloud. "Nearly two quarts, an' I ain't drunk yet. Hand's just as steady."

He held the cigarette at arm's length to prove it. The glowing spark hung motionless. Lanpher did not know that his intoxication was mainly mental. But he knew that a great strength and a greater courage permeated his being. He felt strong enough to lift a horse, and he was afraid of nothing. For the Bar S, its owner and punchers, he did not give a single damn. Should any or all of that rousy outfit attempt to jump sidewise at him he would show them what was what. He, Lanpher of the 88, would run them off the range so far they'd need four years to ride back. They had run blazers on him long enough. He'd stand no more nonsense from them, and he called on his Maker to bear witness that he wouldn't. As to that nester, Lorimer, the man who had helped steal the ten thousand dollars belonging to the 88, the man who had skinned him out of his bonus, as to that unmentionable dog, he would die the death.

"I'll hang him, by——!" Lanpher snarled. "I'll burn his shack an' his wagons an' run off his stock. That daughter o' his can cash for all I care. She's got no business havin' a daddy like hers."

Nearly two quarts of indifferent whisky will shatter almost any human being's sense of proportion. Lanpher picked up the bottle and made it an even two quarts.

He lowered the bottle, held it to his ear and shook it, but he could hear no answering guggle and swash. He regretfully set the bottle down and wished for another. Luckily there was no other nearer than Farewell. No man may tuck away three quarts of raw liquor at a sitting and continue on top of ground.

It struck him that the windows and doorway were beginning to stand out grayly against the darkness. The day was coming. Lanpher went to the doorway and

looked out. A faint lemon-yellow streaked low in the east. Across the way a sudden sharp flare of light outlined the windows of the cook-shack. Cookie had arisen.

Lanpher went outside. He filled his lungs with the clean-washed air of dawn and licked his thin lips cat-fashion. He walked to the corral and back without a perceptible stagger. Continually he ran a hand through his tousled hair. In all that he did he was conscious of no physical effort.

"I guess the boys won't do no wood-cuttin' to-day," he said to himself. "No, I guess not."

At breakfast the men of the outfit noticed that their manager's eyes were over-bright, his face and nose over-red and his tongue over-talkative. They considered it a peculiar species of hang-over, but, after all, it was his own affair. When the first man to finish piled his cup and plate and pushed them from him, Lanpher leaned forward, his face sharp-drawn and eager.

"No wood-cuttin' to-day, boys," he said in a voice that was the least bit thick. "We're gonna go an' call on that nester that sifted through here awhile ago — him with the two wagons an' the female daughter. The one I told to git an' he wouldn't. He's took root over at Sweetwater Mountain. We're gonna take our ropes along an' we're gonna stretch him."

The punchers looked at Lanpher in amazed silence. What was the matter with him? Why couldn't he let the poor devil of a nester alone? Sweetwater Mountain was over on the Cross-in-a-box range anyway. Let Jack Ritchie and his men attend to the intruder. Besides, the nester's daughter was remarkably pretty. They were exceedingly human, these punchers of the 88.

"What yuh wanna stretch him for?" asked Tom Dowling.

"Because he knows who stole fifty thousand dollars from the express company, an' he won't tell. Ten thou-

sand dollars of it was money consigned to me to buy cattle with. Ten thousand wheels. An' this jigger won't open his yap. He'll stand hangin'."

"I should remark!" cried Rockwell, swinging his legs over the bench.

"Bet yuh," was Slim Mack's endorsement, as Slim followed suit.

"Why ain't he been lynched already by the Farewell bunch?" queried shrewd Tom Dowling. "Don't they know about it?"

"Shore they do," declared Lanpher, flashing his rodent-like grin on Tom Dowling. "Shore they do, but Kansas Casey won't let 'em do nothin' till they get more proof. But me, I got proof enough. I know he's a coyote an' a road agent, an' I know he knows all about that money. Why, gents, he even had some o' the gold in his pocket. They found part of it on him, an' Kansas says it ain't enough evidence yet. By ——, it's enough for me!"

Judging by the expeditious manner in which they left the dining room and broke for the corrals, it was enough for them also.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE WARNING

When Red Kane came out of the Happy Heart the dust of Lanpher's going, quiescent in the windless air, hung above the southern trail.

"Wonder if Lanpher has drifted," said Red Kane.

"Nemmine wonderin' about Lanpher," was the advice of Kansas Casey, "or you an' me an' Old Salt'll have to traipse right back inside an' belly the bar again. I ain't gonna have no gunplay in Farewell to-day, Red, nor to-morrow neither. You let Lanpher be, like a good feller."

"Puttin' her thataway," Red grumbled, "they's only one thing to do. But yo're takin' a lot on yourself, Kansas. I dunno as I like it. Maybe I'd feel better if we hopped in an' asked the barkeep the time o' day once more. How about it?"

"No, not another one," Mr. Saltoun replied firmly. "I wish you'd go down to the blacksmith shop, Red, an' ride herd on that lazy, no-account Piney Jackson till he gets the buckboard fixed. He's a-layin' down on the job. I've knowed him since General Forsyth's fight on the Republican, an' he ain't changed a mite. Not a mite. An' look here, Red, yo're a good puncher an' a hard worker an' I like yuh a lot, but I'm with Kansas in this Lanpher business. Don't go projectin' round huntin' trouble with him if he's still in town. The Bar S is gettin' along right peaceable lately with the 88, an' business is so good I don't want it bothered."

"You was talkin' up to him yoreself," complained Red. "I wasn't lookin' for a fight."

"Me neither. What do I wanna go fightin' for? I'm peaceable. I don't carry no chips on my shoulder or nothin'. I like Lanpher. I wouldn't wish him no harm for a lot."

"Shore, I know all about that, Red. We all know yo're a li'l he-lamb. What yuh snickerin' at, Kansas? Don't yuh mind him, Red. He can't help it, the poor feller. Before I forget it, Tim Page wants a new pair of leather cuffs an' a green silk handkerchief, a big one. Here's the money. I'd get 'em myself, only Mike's out some'ers an' Miss Blythe dunno where the cuffs are, an' I gotta drag it. I been wastin' time round here long enough. An', Red, if Piney gets the buckboard fixed before the stage pulls in, wait till after an' get the mail."

Piney was finishing the last spoke when Red entered the blacksmith shop and took a precarious seat on the edge of the cooling-tub.

"Yuh'd oughta have her done to-night," said Red hopefully, eying the amount of completed work.

"Done nothin'," returned Piney with an oily smile. "Yo're lucky if yuh get that there buckboard to-morrow night. Why, Red, yuh'd be surprised at the size o' this job. They's always somethin' new croppin' up. I thought this mornin' when I seen the fifth wheel had a crack that they wasn't no more damage, but now, Red — an' I was surprised too, 'cause I'd looked it over real careful — now, this afternoon, I found I gotta make two new nave-bands an' a understrap. Them nave-bands gotta be fitted careful, yuh know, Red. That's one job I can't hurry. . . . . Huh? Me slow? Well, I shore like that. Which yo're the hardest gent to please I ever did see. An' me a-slavin' like a Turk this weather so's to finish up for yuh. I had to make all new fellys too, Red. It wasn't only the spokes. An' I s'pose you think

I didn't have no shoein' to do. This buckboard ain't the only thing I live for, nawsir. Had two mules an' a hoss to-day awready. If yuh wanna make yoreself useful, Red, s'pose you hop out an' light up a round fire to heat this tire. That's just s'posin' yo're in a hurry. Me, I don't care how long it takes. I'm good-natured, I am. I don't holler an' fret 'cause other folks ain't got six or seven arms an' legs apiece an' turn out work a mile a minute. I'm reasonable. Did yuh say le's go have a drink, Red?"

"I did not!" shouted the exasperated Red. "I said le's get this buckboard fixed an' be quick about it! Why don't yuh make a new one an' be done with it?"

"I would if I thought Old Salt'd pay the bill. Honest, a new buckboard wouldn't hurt him none, the tightwad."

"Nemmine whether he's a tightwad or not," cried Red loyally. "He don't run up a slashin' big bill for nothin' but a measly old wheel or two an' some busted wrought iron. Yeah, I mean you, y'old fraud. Be ready with that tire. I'll have yore fire in two shakes."

Tom Kane came along while the tire was heating.

"Learnin' to be a blacksmith, Red?" he asked of his now smutty-faced brother.

"Naw, I'm learnin' Piney to be one. Lordy, Tom, the ignorance o' this feller is shore pitiful. But he's comin' along. He'll make a hand some day. Yessir, it wouldn't surprise me none if inside six months he'll be able to tell the difference between a rasp an' the forehammer. Don't yuh think so yoreself, Piney?"

"I think this tire's about right," grinned Piney. "Grab them long-handled pincers, Reddy, old settler, an' we'll swing her over on the wheel. Ready — now."

"There," said Red, surveying the properly tired wheel four minutes later, "that's what I call a reg'lar job. Couldn't be no better if I'd a done it all myself. How about them nave-bands now, Piney?"

But Piney was squinting northward along the dusty length of Main Street. A rider was coming into town, his tall gray horse single-footing wearily. Above the patter of the horse's hoofs sounded the double click of a loose shoe.

"No nave-bands yet awhile, Red," said Piney Jackson. "Yonder's a customer a-comin'. Hear that loose shoe clackin' on the near fore, an' the off fore ain't got none a-tall, an' —"

"An' the hoss has two hairs missin' out of his tail besides," interrupted Red, "an' is seven-year-old comin' eight, an' the feller a-ridin' him has got a blond-headed wife an' four children, all girls, one of 'em cross-eyed. You'd oughta be a fortune teller, Piney."

"Anyway, that hoss ain't shod behind neither," Piney declared resentfully.

"That's a easy guess," said Red, "they ain't many round here shoes behind."

The rider on the gray came straight to the blacksmith shop and dismounted. He was a stranger, this rider, slim-bodied, with wide shoulders and a wide, unsmiling mouth.

"The li'l hoss cast a shoe this mornin'," said the stranger to Piney, "an' he's fixin' to cast the other, I guess. Anybody ahead o' me?"

"Only a wagon job," replied the blacksmith, taking the gray's bridle. "Hosses always come first. Want him shod behind? Them hoofs are kind o' beginnin' to chip a li'l bit."

"Might's well shoe him all round," nodded the stranger. "Shoe him medium heavy. He'll stand it. He's no daisy-cutter."

He nodded again, turned abruptly and headed across the street toward the Starlight Saloon.

"Rawhide hoss," said Tom Kane, his critical eyes sweeping over the gray's build.

"Too long-legged," was Red's verdict.

"Got a corn comin'," vouchsafed the blacksmith, who, the near fore between his knees, was wrenching off the shoe with the pincers. "An' I got just one bar shoe his size left in the place. Hope the other foot's all right. Damfi wanna make another bar shoe."

"Why don't yuh cut away the outside wall an' use a plain shoe?" suggested Red, anxious to expedite matters as much as possible.

"That would be just about what you'd do!" Piney exclaimed in fine scorn. "But when a hoss goes out of here, he's shod proper, lemme tell yuh. I'll cut away the horn o' the outside wall all right, an' I'll shoe with a bar shoe so's the frog takes the weight. A plain shoe, huh! I never tacked a plain shoe on a hoss with corns yet, an' I ain't gonna begin now. Why, in the Sioux campaign o' '69 I've knowed General Forsyth to peg out a blacksmith for gettin' brash with hosses' feet thataway. Just before the fight on the Republican River, an' Old Salt'll tell yuh the same — he was there, too — just before that fraycas — "

"C'mon, Tom," Red Kane besought in mock alarm, plucking his brother by the sleeve. "Piney's gonna plant them Injuns again. He dunno the war's over. C'mon before we lose our arms an' legs."

They departed, laughing, followed by much earnest abuse hurled by the irritated blacksmith.

"Good feller, Piney," said Red Kane, turning into the Starlight.

"Shore," assented Tom, "only he can't never forget he used to fork a army tree. The bottle with the sawbuck," he told the bartender, "an' trot out a box o' yore cigars."

"The best," supplemented Red. "No cabbages nor ol' rope neither for us two li'l orphans."

Red Kane, a cigar in the corner of his mouth, cupped

his right hand round his glass and leaned comfortably against the bar.

At the other end of the bar stood the slim-bodied, wide-shouldered stranger. He paid no attention to any of the other customers. With the bottom of his whisky glass he was making little wet rings on the surface of the bar. Occasionally he would draw long and deeply at the cigarette hanging from his lower lip and slowly blow out the smoke through his nostrils.

Red, regarding him casually, perceived that which had at first escaped his attention — the stranger had inordinately small feet. Red's own feet, in common with those of most cowboys, were not large, but the stranger's were a deal smaller. No woman need have been ashamed to take the size boot he wore.

Red's idle eyes became aware that the stranger's boots were an excellent pair, well made and nearly new. The heels were straight, square-set. About the spurs there was no touch of silver-inlaid fancy work. They were plain, hand-forged steel spurs, with rowels larger than usually prevailed on the northern ranges. One of the rowel points was broken short off.

"I heard yuh throwed down on Carlson," said Tom in a low tone.

"I had to," Red turned toward his brother. "Yuh see — "

"Here he comes now," Tom interrupted.

The thick-set figure of Carlson pushed through the doorway and walked straight toward Red Kane. The latter, alert as the proverbial weasel, shifted position slightly. His right hand dropped at his side. Carlson grinned pacifically.

"No hard feelin's," he said, fronting up to the bar at Red's side. "Anyhow, they ain't none from where I'm standin'."

"Which is goin' the limit," declared Red with a smile.

"I'd like to know what's fairer than that? Barkeep, slide along another glass. Here's the bottle, Carlson. Drink hearty."

Carlson drank, set down his glass and looked straight into Red's eyes.

"Look out for Lenn an' Dill," he whispered. "I've a notion they're a-layin' for yuh. So long."

Without another word Carlson departed.

"What did he say?" queried Tom.

Red told him. Tom's mouth straightened and he hitched up his belt.

"They's always two of us in our family," he said. "It's shore white o' Carlson, but," he qualified, knowing his town and its people, "I kind o' guess he done it only 'cause he's more hostyle to Lenn an' Dill than he is to you."

"I ain't doin' no worryin' why he done it," said Red the practical. "He done it, an' I'm gonna go search out them two fellers an' give 'em a chance to spring their joke."

"They's nothin' like doin' things on the jump," concurred Tom.

They went out, these two brothers, and, because they did not know the disposition of the enemy, they walked one behind the other, a distance of thirty yards between them.

They went directly to the dance-hall. Lenn did not go on duty behind the bar till seven o'clock in the evening, but it was the man's habit to infest the place even in his leisure moments.

Red and Tom entered the dance-hall from different entrances. It is a point in military strategy to fall upon the enemy from flank and front simultaneously. Neither of the two brothers had ever heard of Murat or Marlborough, but no commander of troops could have timed his onfall at a more opportune moment than they did

theirs. Entering the dance-hall by way of the rear and side doors, they found the enemy unbraced and unready.

Spunk Lenn had even partially dismounted his six-shooter. The cylinder lay on the bar beside a freshly broken box of cartridges. Spunk Lenn, holding a piece of paper against the recoil plate to reflect the light, was squinting through the barrel. He was cold sober. So was not Pickles Dill. This gentleman was leaning against the bar and orating in maudlin tones.

Red and Tom had heard Mr. Dill's voice as they came up the street, but the words had been indistinguishable for that Mr. Dill's delivery was thick and rather sketchy. Once they were under the same roof with Mr. Dill they could understand him perfectly.

"Nawsir," Mr. Dill was saying, thumping the bar with a dirty fist and nodding his head solemnly at every thump, "nawsir, I don' care how fuf-fast he is with a gu-gu-gug-gun. I'm pup-pup-pretty fuf-fast m-ownself."

Inspired by similar hunches, Red and Tom halted just within their respective doorways. Their entry had gone unperceived. Besides Messrs. Lenn and Dill, themselves and the day bartender, there was no one else in the dance-hall. And the day bartender, a fat-brained chucklehead, was oblivious to everything but the antics and speech of Pickles Dill.

"You better go to bed, Pickles," advised Mr. Lenn, busy with a rawhide pull-through. "You ain't in no condition to act hostyle. You go to bed like a good feller."

But the "good feller" stood firmer in his convictions than he did on his legs.

"You — mum-mean I'm drunk," he said, with a hiccup. "Why don't yuh shay sho right out shus-stead o' hintin' rur-round thish-way. Well, I ain't drunk, I'm shober's you are. Shoberer, by ——. An' I feel lul-like hoppin' out after him. I'm gug-gonna do it. I'll

ride the li'l hoss all round his collar. I'll make him eat hish own sush-shix-shooter, that's what I'll do. I'm gonna dud-do it, I tell yuh that fuf-flat. I'm gonna do it now. You come along an' wash me fuf-fill Red Kane full o' lead."

He started teeteringly in the general direction of the front door. Spunk Lenn seized him by the elbow and swung him hard on into the bar.

"Have another drink, Pickles," he invited. Then to the bartender in an undertone, "Give it to him in a tin cup. That oughta fix him so's I can get him to bed without a fuss."

Red Kane could, on occasion, move silently. He did so on this occasion. When the bartender straightened his body after bending down to a lower shelf for a tin cup, Red Kane was leaning nonchalantly against the far end of the bar. The bartender, holding tin cup and bottle in his hands, froze stiff. No doubt it was his chill that made the bottle and cup tinkle pleasantly together.

Mr. Lenn looked at the bartender in surprise. Then his eyes followed the eyes of the bartender. Mr. Lenn was no catch-as-catch-can individual. He did not lose his head. Not knowing how much or how little Red Kane had heard, he chose to put the burden of opening a conflict upon the puncher.

Red silently gazed upon Mr. Lenn and the maudlin Mr. Dill. The latter's wandering eyes had not rested upon Mr. Kane as yet. Nor had they perceived the other Mr. Kane, who had come up from the rear and assumed an attitude of lazy carelessness on a chair across the room. But Mr. Lenn had observed the other Mr. Kane and the other Mr. Kane's choice of position, and it had not increased his peace of mind.

Honor, notwithstanding the proverb to the contrary, does not always obtain among thieves. It does not always remain afloat between friends. Mr. Lenn and Mr.

Dill were ostensibly friends, and, now that danger actually threatened, Mr. Lenn pushed Mr. Dill into deep water without a qualm. In so doing Mr. Lenn's purpose may have been deeper than the water. He may have expected Mr. Kane to shoot a drunken man, thereby gaining the disapproval of the multitude. For there is a well-grounded prejudice against inflicting bodily injury upon one over-served with liquor.

Whatever Mr. Lenn's expectations, it is history that he reached across the bar and tapped the witless bartender on a trembling elbow.

"Gonna choke that bottle to death?" Mr. Lenn demanded severely.

The bartender jerkily placed cup and bottle before Mr. Lenn. The latter poured a stiffish drink into the tin cup and shoved the cup into the hand of Mr. Dill.

"Drink hearty," urged Mr. Lenn.

Mr. Dill, raising the cup to his lips, half-turned toward his friend.

Across Mr. Lenn's shoulder Mr. Dill perceived Mr. Red Kane standing near the end of the bar. In effect, he saw two Mr. Red Kanes. While he looked, the two became three. Which phenomena intrigued Mr. Dill.

He set down the tin cup without drinking and laughed crazily.

"Lul-look," he said, pointing a shaking arm and hand. "Lul-look. There's Red Kuk-kane nun-now."

"Yeah," murmured Mr. Lenn in the tone of one who has forgotten something. "I see him."

Mr. Lenn slipped to the rear of Mr. Dill.

"They's two o' yuh, Ru-Red," said Mr. Dill with a puzzled frown. "I didn't know yuh was twins." Mr. Dill's wavering gaze staggered sidewise and embraced Red Kane's brother Tom where he sat on his chair against the side wall. "An' Tom's twins too," Mr. Dill went on distractedly. "I dud-don't understan' it. Whysh

Ru-Red twins an' whysh Tom twins too. Both of 'em tut-twins, an' I wanna know why. Cuc-can you tell me why?"

He wheeled inward and stabbed an uncertain forefinger at the bartender.

"I —" began the bartender.

"My ——!" cried Mr. Dill. "Yo're twins too! An' Spuh—Spuh—Spunk he's twins. An' that bottle's tut-twins."

He reached for the bottle and, naturally, miscalculated and clutched a handful of air. He grabbed again, wildly, and upset the bottle. It rolled across the bar, over the edge and smashed on the floor. The mishap annoyed Mr. Dill.

"What did yuh do that for?" he roared at the bartender. Then, his mood changing on the instant, he began to weep. "Poor li'l bottle," he moaned. "Never did no harm to nobody. All broke to pieces. Poor li'l bottle."

He wiped his eyes with the back of his hand and sniffled. Obviously he had completely forgotten ever having borne malice toward Red Kane. Mr. Lenn was at a loss. His eyes flickered nervously. Red Kane smiled. He had shrewdly suspected an evil intent at the back of Mr. Lenn's mind.

"Throw the red-eye into him, Spunk, why don't yuh?" he queried. "Then maybe he'll get his dander up."

"What yuh talkin' about?" Thus Mr. Lenn, wearing his best expression of wondering innocence.

"Me? Yuh mean me? Yuh mean what am I talkin' about, huh? Oh, I was just a-talkin'. I do that now an' then. Kind of a habit with me. Djuh know, Spunk I'll bet another drink would help his memory."

"'His memory,'" repeated Mr. Lenn.

"Shore, his memory. Ain't he forgot somethin'?"

"I dunno what yo're talkin' about," declared Mr. Lenn

palely. He felt queerly within, did Mr. Lenn. Red Kane seemed bent on forcing a fight. Every advantage lay with the puncher. Mr. Lenn cursed Pickles Dill and his loose tongue.

"If you ain't gonna give him that drink, you'd oughta take him home," Red Kane pointed out kindly. "He ain't in no condition to leave loose on the range, Pickles ain't. Look at him, Spunk. He's fallin' asleep right now this minute."

Even as Red spoke, Mr. Dill, who had been clinging limpet-like to the bar, relaxed his hold, slid gently to the floor, buried his nose in his hat and began to snore.

"Pack him into the back room," Mr. Lenn said to the bartender and started to leave the dance-hall.

The voice of Red Kane halted Mr. Lenn before he reached the door.

"Yo're forgettin' somethin', too," said Red Kane.

There! It had come, the challenge. Mr. Lenn's scared nerves read a menace into Red's simple words. He whirled, his body crouching, his right hand jerking down and up.

Fully expecting to meet the flash and smoke of Red's six-shooter he pulled trigger three times before he realized that his hammer was clicking vainly and that Red's thumbs remained hooked in his belt.

"Told yuh yuh'd forgot somethin'," Red Kane observed calmly. "Yore cylinder. Yuh left it layin' on top of the bar."

Mr. Lenn perceived with shame that Red Kane was telling the truth. He looked at the empty frame of his gun with sullen eyes.

"I expect yo're a-wishin' that cylinder had been in place," Red observed softly. "Is that it?"

Mr. Lenn shook his head.

"I thought —" he began.

"Nemmine what yuh thought," interrupted Red Kane.

"It don't signify — really. Only — only I'd be kind o' careful how I throwed down on folks, feller. I'd shore be a heap careful. S'pose now, Spunk, you pick up yore li'l tin cylinder an' pull yore freight. I get tired lookin' at yuh sometimes. Speakin' plain, Spunk, I'd drag it out o' town if I was you. An', if I was a gent thoughtful of my health, I'd do it inside o' ten minutes. Yuh see, feller, I'm gonna go down to Tom's now after my Winchester. Then I'm comin' back, an' I'm gonna scout round for you, an', if yo're anyways visible, I'll give yuh the whole magazine. That's the how of it, Spunk."

CHAPTER TWELVE

A WILD TIME

INTO this lively situation blundered headforemost the owner of the dance-hall, the late Mr. Stute's successor, one "Piggy" Wadsworth. A plumpish man, Piggy's mental processes were slow, but he was sufficiently bright to sense a certain tension in the atmosphere. He turned a moon face from one to another of those present.

"What's the trouble?" he asked, wrinkling an anxious forehead.

He wished no violence in his place. Violence he abhorred. Violence and a too active participation in public affairs had been the death of Mr. Stute, the erstwhile proprietor. In his mind's eye Piggy could still see the white form of Mr. Stute — he was hanged in his nightshirt — a dangle against the sky. As a dance-hall owner honest Piggy was decidedly miscast. He should have been born a periwinkle.

"What's the trouble?" he repeated. "Don't start nothin' now, Spunk. This here's a respectable place, an' I'm aimin' to keep it so. I don't wanna get mixed up in no gun-plays myself, an' I don't want none in here. What yuh fussin' with a customer for, anyhow? I've told yuh time an' again to hang onto yore temper in here. It drives away trade to have a barkeep a-rowin' alla time. Folks don't come in here for a fraycas. They come in for a drink, y'understand. Whatsa trouble, anyhow? I've done asked yuh three times."

"If yuh waited after the first time instead o' surgin'

hell-bent into a sermon, I'd 'a' told yuh," snarled Spunk Lenn. "They ain't no trouble. I'm playin' cat's-cradle with Red Kane. Whadda you guess?"

"Spunk's tellin' the truth — for once," remarked Red Kane. "But I dunno as I'm a heap anxious to keep on playin' cat's-cradle with Spunk. He's too swift for me or somethin'. I like to gamble, but a shore thing is too much. Spunk is leavin' our midst."

Fat Piggy stared and scratched the top of his head, where the hair grew sparsely.

"He's leavin'? Whadda yuh mean?" Again Piggy scratched the top of his head.

"I mean you'll have to look round for a new night barkeep," explained Red Kane. "Yuh see, Piggy, Spunk's decided to shoo himself away. Spunk," he continued, his light tone becoming hard, "don't lemme keep you. Yore cylinder is still on top o' the bar. Lessee how fast yuh can pick it up an' get out o' that door."

"If it wasn't for yore brother behind me," said Mr. Lenn, stepping to the bar and retrieving his property, "I'd shoot it out with yuh."

"No, that's not yore reason, Spunk. Never say so. Tom's bein' behind yuh has nothin' to do with it. You ain't got the nerve. You hear me. You ain't got the nerve. If yuh had the nerve, yuh'd slip in yore cylinder, slam home yore center-pin an' turn yore bull loose. See, my hand ain't no more'n reasonable close to my six-shooter, an' *you* got yore gun out."

Spunk Lenn's fingers ceased moving. The cylinder remained half in, half out of the frame.

"Huh?" Mr. Lenn looked frowningly at Mr. Kane.

"I'm tellin' yuh y'aint got the nerve to cut down on me again. Y'aint got the nerve, an' right now this minute I'm gonna see how li'l nerve you really have got."

Red Kane sprang forward and planted a jab on the nose of Mr. Lenn. The latter, with a squeak of anguish,

promptly essayed to complete the assembling of his six-shooter. But Red Kane did not wait on the convenience of Mr. Lenn. He bored in, keeping his elbows close to his ribs, and heavily punished Mr. Lenn's eye and ear. The cylinder flew from Spunk Lenn's fingers. He struck savagely at his opponent with the barrel of the six-shooter. Red Kane dodged the blow, wrenched the weapon from the hand of Mr. Lenn and clipped him across the mouth with it.

Spitting blood and three teeth, Mr. Lenn lowered his head and charged Red Kane. Which move was most ill-advised. Red Kane raised a hard knee and smote Mr. Lenn on his already painful nose.

With a sound midway between a grunt and a groan Mr. Lenn went over backward and landed squarely on the stomach of the sleeping Mr. Dill. This was lucky for Lenn. Otherwise he would have broken his neck. The stricken Pickles, as his comrade rolled off his stomach, doubled up like a closing jack-knife. He wheezed and gasped, clutching his middle the while with both hands. Then nausea seized him, and he wallowed like a pig under the feet of the fighting men.

Mr. Lenn, when he arose again, charged his antagonist. But not head down this time. He had learned that lesson. He went forward swinging both fists, only to go down flat beneath a shower of hooks and jabs to the face.

Red Kane did not know that the blows he was delivering so well were hooks and jabs. He had never seen a prize-fight, and of fistic science he was naturally as ignorant as a Mennonite maid. But he was a willing worker, had plenty of instinct and was hard as the proverbial keg of nails. The ex-bartender could not go the distance with the cowboy. But there are more ways than one of winning a fight, especially when the row is unhampered by rules.

From his latest knockdown Mr. Lenn arose slowly.

There was blood on his face and murder in his heart. Moreover, there was craft in his brain and a bowie under his vest. He was so consumed with rage engendered by the acute pain of his hurts that he had long since forgotten to be afraid. Some men are like that.

Mr. Lenn, swaying on his feet, was not nearly so weary as he looked. He shook his head as if to clear it and dashed the blood from his fast-closing eyes with the back of a bruised left hand. His right arm he kept across his middle, the forearm parallel to and immediately above his belt, the fist close in to the points of the open vest.

He crouched and tottered toward Red Kane. The latter was calmly awaiting an opportunity to administer to Mr. Lenn his quietus. A right or left swing neatly planted beneath an ear or on the point of the jaw would be best, Red decided as he watched the advance of his battered antagonist.

Spunk Lenn gave every indication of a man almost out on his feet. He gasped like a netted fish. His knees wobbled beneath him. As acting it was badly overdone, but Mr. Lenn's audience was not disposed to be critical.

Red Kane, in his unblissful ignorance, set himself to send over the knockout. Mr. Lenn appeared to give way suddenly. He sank down almost to the floor. He rested his left hand on the floor to steady himself. His body bowed forward. The outswinging flap of his vest completely concealed his right hand.

Then his slack body straightened with a snap from the heels, and he sprang forward and upward. No catamount could have been brisker. Mr. Lenn's right hand shot out from beneath the vest. There were eight inches of gray steel projecting from that right hand, and with all the strength of arm and shoulder Mr. Lenn stabbed straight at Red Kane's stomach.

But the Sisters Three fought for Red Kane that day. Had the puncher been going away at the moment, nothing

could have prevented the grooved blade from ripping up his vitals. But he was coming in at the psychological nick, and he met the blow half-way. The point of the bowie struck one of the brass conchas on his chaps, glanced, and did no more material damage than slit the leather over his hip bone.

Red Kane would have been perfectly justified had he stepped back, pulled his six-shooter and filled the crafty Mr. Lenn full of holes. But even then, with Mr. Lenn gathering himself for another murderous effort, Red did not draw his firearm. Instead he hopped to one side, snatched up a handy chair and flailed Mr. Lenn across the face with it.

Mr. Lenn dropped his knife and reeled backward. He was suffering the most exquisite torture, for a chair leg had rapped his funny-bone and a corner of the chair had deprived him of three more of his most prominent teeth and broken his nose. He gave vent in his agony to a shrill ululation that Red Kane cut short with another swing of the useful chair. Mr. Lenn tumbled senseless into the angle between the bar and the front wall and lay huddled, a sadly crumpled human being.

Red Kane gazed down at his handiwork and flung the chair from him.

"Y'oughta make yore chairs heavier," he observed to the marveling Piggy. "If the one I used had five more pounds heft, I'd 'a' knocked him silly first crack."

"My ——!" breathed the awed Piggy, staring at the wreck of his late employee. "My ——! I never seen nothin' like it since I was born. Yuh — yuh wouldn't hardly think they's a real face behind all that blood an' mush."

"Yuh'd oughta shot the polecat," Tom reproached his brother. "I'd 'a' done it. Don't yuh see, yuh idjit, instead o' windin' the play up like yuh waded out to do so careless an' free yuh've just started a new deal? But

maybe yuh rubbed him out after all," he added, brightening perceptibly. "Lessee."

Tom crossed to the battered Mr. Lenn and fingered his person at various points of vantage. Red Kane scooped up the discarded bowie, revolver-frame and cylinder and tossed the lot through the doorway into the street. The ironmongery slithered at the feet of that semi-invalid Mr. Cox, who, attracted by the shortened shrieks of Mr. Lenn, was coming along the sidewalk. Mr. Cox, surmising by the very shrillness of the screams that one of the dance-hall girls was indulging in delirium tremens and fearing to miss some part of the excitement, hurried blithely up. His expectant grin became even more expectant at sight of the shower of hardware. She was throwing things. She would no doubt furnish plenty of amusement. He wondered why she had stopped screaming.

"I guess he'll live all right," Tom Kane was saying regretfully when Mr. Cox entered. "He's breathin' right good, an' I don't think his skull's fractured. Shore tough luck that chair bein' so light."

"Here's Coxy," cried Red joyously. "Good ol' Coxy, lame arm an' all. How's the pin, old settler?"

But the old settler was in no mood for idle banter, — at least not from the tongue of Red Kane. He had not forgotten what Red had said to him at the ranch-house by Sweetwater Mountain. The grin faded abruptly from the mouth of Mr. Cox as he faced the laughing devil in Red's gray eyes. The eyes of Mr. Cox shifted quickly to the object that had at one time been a perfectly good bartender.

If Mr. Cox could not recognize the features, he recognized the clothing. His expression grew very glum.

"Don't look so happy," suggested the impudent Red. "Ain't yuh sorry for Spunk even a little bit? Where's yore sympathy?"

This was rubbing it in with a vengeance. Cox's sidewise glance at Red was savage.

"Yeah," said Cox, "I'm sorry for Spunk all right, an' I got sympathy to burn. Don't yuh worry none about that. I even got sympathy for you, Red."

"Why me? Do I look like I needed it?"

"Yuh'll need it all right. Yuh'll need it a-plenty."

"That sounds real interestin'," drawled Red. "Who's gonna make me need sympathy?"

But Rooster Cox was not to be drawn further. One corner of his malicious mouth lifted in a crooked smile, and he departed, nursing his injured arm.

"Gonna tell Durkin," thought Red contemptuously. "Piggy," he said aloud, "when Spunk comes to, tell him I'll stretch out his ten minutes till to-morrow mornin' at six o'clock. I'll be lookin' for him after six. C'mon, Tom."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE DARK PLACES

"WILL this be large enough?"

The attractive Miss Blythe, Mike Flynn's partner in the Blue Pigeon, spread a green silk handkerchief upon the counter.

"I guess," said Red Kane. "Tim shore ought to be pleased with that. Yes, ma'am, cuffs an' the handkerchief will be all. Nemmine wrappin' up the cuffs. I'll tie them on the saddle, but yuh can put a piece o' newspaper round the handkerchief if yuh will. Don't wanna get it dirty if I can help it. Where's the man-talkin' parrot?"

"Out back," she twinkled, nodding her head toward the sleeping-quarters of Mike Flynn. "I won't have the horrid thing in here while I'm tending store. Such language I never listened to in all my born days. Seven dollars and four-bits, Mr. Kane."

"Betcha yo're buyin' them things for yoreself," Tom observed skeptically when he and his brother were walking homeward.

"I was not," denied Red. "They're for Tim Page, like I said. I s'pose Tim wants to be fancy for once. He shore oughta be in that handkerchief. She's a right outstandin' green."

"Alla same, I'll bet they ain't for Tim," insisted Tom. "Yo're fixin' on goin' out to Sweetwater Mountain again, an' yuh wanna look joyful. Can't fool me. I know you, old-timer. Nemmine denyin' it, I wouldn't believe yuh

if yuh told me till yuh was blue in the face. Red, you make me sick! What do yuh wanna go get married for? I don't mind a fool. Gotta expect that, but it ain't necessary to be a damn fool, an' you personal are actin' like the damndest fool ever drawed breath. You mark what I'm tellin' yuh, Red, you'll be sorry. You'll be sorry shore as yo're a foot high. Look at me, I'm single; I'm happy; I'm makin' money. What more do yuh want? What more *can* yuh want? Hell's bells, do yuh want a woman tellin' yuh how many pills yuh can smoke an' supervisin' yore drinks?

"Think o' that, Red. Can't go into the Happy Heart for the smallest kind of a snifter without havin' yore wife askin' about it an' objectin' like one o' my mules when Piney Jackson shoes him. An' if y'ever got an edge on, Red, an' brought it home with yuh, she'd raise the roof. That's the kind o' hairpin a wife is. I know; I got married friends, an' they told me.

"Now shut up. Lemme talk. You'll have plenty time to jaw while I'm rustlin' the chuck. You take yore Dot Lorimer friend now. She's got a temper, she has. S'pose yuh don't do everythin' to suit her — forget to chop the light wood or somethin'. What'll she do, huh? She won't say much. Not her. She ain't that sort. She'll take the hatchet or a rollin' pin an' beat the drum on yore face. That's what she'll do."

"Maybe I'll like it, Tom," grinned the amused Red. "When yuh like a person, yuh like what they do to yuh. Look at me now. Yo're a-whangin' at me with yore tongue, an' I ain't sayin' a word. Shows I like yuh. Yuh don't appreciate it neither. Fine brother, you are."

"I know when I'm well off, you bet. I ain't doin' my endeavors to stick my head through the loop of a rope. I ain't got nothin' in petticoats to boss me round, an' I ain't gonna have nothin', neither. Single cussedness, that's me."

"You'll be followin' my trail in less'n a year, maybe sooner. You'll see."

"I will not. Not while I know how to cook I won't. They's ham to-night, Red. Ham'n 'taters. Wanna wait while I make biscuits? All right. Grab the ax an' split the light wood for to-morrow mornin' an' to-morrow night too while yo're about it. Yuh might's well learn bein' useful, cowboy. Then yuh won't mind it so much later."

Tom nimbly dodged through the doorway of his shack and slammed the door just as a stick of stove wood crashed against the planking.

"Alla same, he's the fool," Red told himself, as he twiddled the ax out of the chopping block. "I don't believe she'd act thataway. She couldn't. She ain't that kind of a girl."

It was in the small hours of the morning when Tom Kane, sleeping the sleep of a tired man, was smartly cracked on the head by a heavy article. He came alive on the instant, bounced upright and automatically felt for his six-shooter. Beside his bunk, dimly visible in the pale light of the early dawn, stood the dark figure of his brother.

"'T'sall right!" Red cried hastily. "I was only tryin' to find out what time it was without wakin' yuh, an' the alarm clock dropped on yore face."

"My ear," corrected Tom huffily, cautiously fingering the organ in question. "It dropped on my ear, yuh butter-fingered hay-maker! It might 'a' put out my eye if I'd been a-layin' like I do usual. Why didn't yuh strike a match if yuh wanted to find out the time?"

"I didn't wanna wake yuh up," explained Red. "I knowed yuh wouldn't wanna be waked up, so I tried to take the clock over to the window where they was some light. Y'oughtn't to keep the thing on a shelf right over yore bed. No place for a clock nohow. Next time yuh

might get damaged instead o' just batted on the ear. Lordy, what a time yuh make for just a ear."

"Oh, is that so?" snapped Tom, while his brother struck a match and held it in front of the clock's face. "Yuh talk like I got several ears an' could easy afford to have one of 'em hammered flat any time you feel like it. Well, I can't an' I won't, an' you do any more such fool tricks an' I'll damage you. I always could lick yuh, an' I still can, you bet. What yuh wanna know the time for? You ain't gotta work to-day."

"I got a engagement, an' you can't lick me an' never could, an' —"

"Nemmine about that. What's yore engagement? What kind o' devilment are y'up to now?"

"You know as well as I do. I told Spunk Lenn he'd have to be out o' town this mornin' an' I forgot whether I gave him till four, five or six; so I'm gonna play safe an' say it's four. Clock says three forty-eight, so I'll just be pullin' on my boots an' leavin' yuh. Yuh might's well have breakfast ready for me when I get back."

"Who was yore last year's nigger?" demanded Tom, whose ear still tingled. "If yo're gonna go out lookin' for Lenn, I gotta go along, an' you know it. Lenn has other friends besides Pickles, Durkin an' Cox. Yo're too venturesome, likewise yo're a idjit, a plumb idjit. The idea of gettin' up at four in the mornin' instead o' givin' Lenn the benefit of the doubt an' waitin' till six like a Christian an' then goin' out an' havin' yore li'l riot! Are you figurin' on haulin' Spunk out o' bed?"

"If I gotta," replied Red, busy with his boots. "But you needn't put yoreself to no trouble, Tom," he continued sarcastically. "I wouldn't want yuh to bother about me for a whole lot. I ain't no child, an' I don't need no guardian."

"What you need is a nurse," was the sharp return. "Shut up now, I guess you got nothin' to do with it. If

I wanna get in this, I guess I got a right to. I was in it yesterday, an' you didn't have no objections. Now yuh wanna glom all the fun yoreself. We'll see about that, we will. Where's my belt? I'll bet you moved it or somethin'. Why can't yuh leave things alone? Oh, here she is."

"Shore, right where yuh hung it on the back o' the chair. Y'old sputter-box, if yuh didn't have somethin' to squall round about, yuh wouldn't be happy. What do yuh do when I ain't here?"

Tom countered in kind, and they left the shack still engaged in heated argument.

It was a minute past the hour and broad in the light of the coming day when Red Kane rapped on the door of the one-room log-house behind the dance-hall where Spunk Lenn lived with a man named Murphy, or did live rather, for the man named Murphy, on getting out of bed and coming to the door, informed them with much bitterness that Spunk Lenn had departed at midnight.

"He pulled his freight owin' me money," complained the ex-roommate. "Twenty-eight dollars six-bits he borrowed last month, an' this ain't all neither. They was a bottle of whisky nearly half full under my bed, an' he took that. I ain't missed nothin' else so far, but I guess that ain't Spunk's fault. Likely he didn't have time to do the job complete. An' I thought he was a friend o' mine! I hope I cut his trail sometime. Runnin' off with my money an' my whisky too, the bushwhacker!"

Leaving the man named Murphy to the memory of his wrongs, they returned to the shack and had breakfast. Which meal disposed of, Tom improved the shining hour by overhauling his team harness.

"Goin' south next week," said he, "an' I don't aim to have nothin' bust on the trip. Gotta get new tugs, worse luck. The harness makers don't care what kind o' leather they use no more."

"Yeah," yawned the uninterested Red. "I wish I had somethin' to do. I don't wanna watch Piney all day. I don't feel like it."

"Go an' get the other harness punch then, an' help me. I'll give yuh somethin' to do."

"Naw, I don't mean work. I don't feel like workin' to-day. I feel a heap lazy-like. I don't feel good neither. I got a misery in my stomach. Maybe I'm gonna be sick, Tom. Be reasonable. I gotta look after my health, don't I?"

"Too bad about yuh. Shore is. You didn't have no misery when yuh hauled me out o' bed in the middle o' the night. No, yuh didn't. But now yo're too delicate to work. Yuh poor feller. I'm a-grievin' for yuh, I am. I'm mighty sorry I ain't got a glass case handy for yuh to crawl into an' keep out o' drafts. Maybe yuh'd better go in an' lay down. Couldn't I hold yore hand or somethin'?"

"No," said Red, his face lighting up suddenly. "I dunno as I care about yuh holdin' my paw, but what yuh say about layin' down sounds sort o' good. Maybe I'd better do it. I don't wanna be sick here on yore hands. Lordy, no."

Tom grunted with scorn as Red retreated hurriedly into the shack. Ten minutes later he peered through the window and discovered his brother shaving himself. Tom immediately dropped the back-strap he was examining and scuffled into the house.

"My razor!" he lamented. "Yo're usin' my razor, an' I just spent a solid hour day before yesterday honin' her up good for Sunday mornin'!"

"I'm shore obliged to yuh," Red assured him rapidly, fending him off with the shaving-brush. "It's fine an' sharp. You done a good job."

"An' I got it to do all over again now. What yuh wanna shave for in the middle of the week, anyhow?"

"Because I feel like it. Think I wanna run round lookin' like a porkypine alla time? Well, I don't. I ain't like you. I got respect for my personal appearance, I have. You lemme alone so's I can finish up, an' I'll give yuh back yore pretty li'l razor so's yuh can enjoy yoreself honin' her up again. Go 'way now. Go sit down, for Gawd's sake. You make me nervous hoppin' around thataway."

"I'll make you nervous," yapped the irritated Tom. "You know I don't allow nobody to use that razor. I might 'a' guessed you'd do somethin' like this if I wasn't here to watch yuh. I'll watch yuh now, you can gamble on that. I'll set right here on this table till you get through an' out, that's what I'll do. Where's my makin's? I left 'em right here on the shelf, I know I did. You've took 'em. Where are they?"

"I had to," explained Red, trying to keep one eye on his exasperated relative and the other on the tiny mirror. "My bag was nearly empty. But you stop bellerin', an' I'll lend yuh some when I get through."

"You'll lend me some o' my own tobacco, will yuh? That's good. That's right down generous of you, that is. But I guess I needn't wait till after yo're done shavin', not when you've kindly left one end o' the draw-string stickin' out of yore vest pocket an' the vest hangin' on the wall in plain sight."

Tom gave a triumphant jerk on the draw-string, pulled out the bag and tugged it open.

"Aw!" he exclaimed when he had looked within.

"Yeah," Red tranquilly observed. "I thought li'l Brighteyes would see the draw-string a-stickin' out. So I filled the bag with bits o' paper. The tobacco's in my other bag, an' that's where you won't find it in a hurry. Don't throw that water! They's a cigar in the inside pocket of the vest. Smoke that an' be happy. There, see what yuh made me do — cut myself!"

"Serve yuh right," Tom told him, fishing for the cigar. "Bet she's all squashed. Naw, she ain't, for a wonder. Good thing for you she ain't, too, or I'd 'a' shore soused yuh good an' plenty. Oughta done it anyway. Maybe I will yet. Yeah, I know yuh'd try for to lick me, but doin' it is somethin' else again. Go'n, go'n. Twice over yore chin now, an' call it a day."

Red Kane shrugged a contemptuous shoulder and proceeded with his shaving. The operation completed to his contentment, he pulled off his shirt and hung it up.

"What yuh peelin' yore shirt for?" asked Tom, regarding him curiously. "You ain't gonna change it, are yuh?"

"Shore, why not?" returned Red opening a newspaper-wrapped bundle and pulling therefrom a new shirt he had purchased of Mike Flynn. "I ain't proud. I change my shirt now an' then."

"Yo're gettin' reckless an' — *Is that it?* Is that the shirt you bought at Mike's? Purple hoss-shoes on gray topped by yore red hair is shore a ferocious combination. A house afire wouldn't be deuce high alongside o' you. Nawsir. You ain't gonna wear that bright green handkerchief too, are yuh? An' them cuffs? I thought yuh done said it an' the cuffs was for Tim Page, an' yuh didn't wanna get 'em dirty?"

"Shore they're for Tim, just like I said, but I'm gonna sort o' christen 'em for him first. He won't mind."

"Of course he won't. He'll spit in yore eye an' drownd yuh, that's all he'll do. I know now what yo're gonna do. I knowed it all along, you bet. Yo're goin' out to Sweetwater Mountain this mornin', that's where yo're goin'."

"I might happen along that way," admitted Red. "Yuh see, Tom, I got business over round Sweetwater anyhow, an' I wouldn't want for to go by an' not say 'Howdy.' Why, Tom, maybe the old gent, her father,

maybe he's worse. Maybe she needs help. An' her there all alone too. Ain't you got no heart?"

"Plenty," replied Tom, unmoved by the harrowing picture as detailed by his brother, "but I guess she'd be able to shove along without yore help, seein' she's been a-doin' it for a few years more or less. But go ahead. Run hell-bent into yore bad luck an' shake hands with it for all I care. I wouldn't stop yuh for a lot. Nawsir, not me. Fly at it, cowboy, fly at it. Only don't say I never warned yuh."

"I shore won't. How do I look with the green handkerchief?"

"Like the wrath o' Gawd. I'm tellin' yuh, Red, blindfold the hoss yo're gonna ride, or yuh'll never get the saddle on."

Red, riding out of Farewell, knew that he was disobeying orders, but he salved his conscience by telling himself that Piney was getting along all right. Of course he was. What was the use of sitting round like a bump on a log? Obviously there was no use. Quite so.

When he sighted the nester's ranch-house, he rode warily, his eyes turning from side to side. He did not expect a too hostile reception, but with a sudden lady like Miss Lorimer one could not be too careful.

No human being was visible in the vicinity. Below a smokeless chimney the kitchen door sagged open on its recently mended hinges. Beyond the spring he saw the Lorimer horses grazing.

He dismounted in front of the kitchen, dropped the reins over his horse's head and approached the door.

"Hello," he called, halting at the step.

"Hello. Who's there?" It was the weak voice of Lorimer speaking from the inner room.

"It's me, Red Kane," replied the puncher, entering on the word and walking through the kitchen into the room where the wounded man lay on his springless bunk.

It was hot in the sick-room, hotter than it was outdoors, although all the windows were open wide. The bandaged nester, covered simply by a thin sheet, stared up at Red Kane with fever-bright eyes.

"I seen yuh before," he said, low-voiced, his words slurring and sliding together. "You was in that store in Farewell, an' yuh was here when them fellers tried to make out I was a road agent. I remember yuh. Si' down."

"How do yuh feel?" asked Red cheerily. "Wanna drink or somethin'?"

"My daughter left a pail an' dipper on that chair before she went fishin', an', o' course, clumsy-like, I had to jerk it down off the chair, an' it rolled under the bunk. I would be obliged for a drink. Kind o' thirsty weather, ain't it?"

"Yeah," mumbled Red, on his hands and knees and half under the bunk. "I'll have yuh forgettin' the weather in no time."

He scrambled to his feet and hurried out to the spring. He returned with a full and slopping pail, set it on the chair and dipped in the dipper. With a touch as gentle as a woman's he slipped a hand beneath the nester's head, raised it from the pillow and held the dipper to the dry lips.

Lorimer drank in great noisy gulps. Three brimming dipperfuls were required before his thirst was quenched. After the dipper had been sunk in the pail for the fourth time, he lay back on the pillow with a long sigh of relief.

"Naw, no more," he said in reply to Red's question. "Shore feels fine, that does. I dunno when I wanted a drink so bad."

Red espied a crumpled towel beside the bunk. He picked it up. It was damp.

"My daughter wet that an' put it on my head," ex-

plained Lorimer. "She said it was good for the fever, but it fell off an' I couldn't reach it."

Red poured cold water over the towel, wrung it partly out and then laid the cool and soppy cloth across the burning forehead. The wounded man smiled haggardly.

"That's great," he muttered. "Feels almost as good outside as it does inside."

Lorimer ceased speaking and closed his eyes. Thinking that the wounded man wished to sleep Red went outside for a short smoke. When he returned, Lorimer was picking at the sheet and muttering to himself. The wet towel had slipped from his forehead and hung down over the side of the bunk. Red dampened the towel and readjusted it. Lorimer moved his head wearily from side to side. He ceased not to mutter and pick at the sheet. By and by he spoke more clearly. Here and there Red caught words, phrases, parts of sentences.

"The money," came the words, followed by a numble. Then: "'Course I took it m-m-m-m-m do it again m-m-m-m-m didn' have no right to it all m-m-m-m-m-m —— thieves m-m-m-m-m rob m-m-m-m-m-m-m-m rob my daughter m-m-m-m-Dot m-m-m-m-m-need'n' argufy m-m-m-m I know who's right! Money's mine! Mine, by ——! I tell yuh it's mine! I took it! I tell you I had a right to! It's mine! Mine!"

Lorimer was sitting bolt upright in the bunk. He was pointing his finger at the horrified Red and screaming out his words. The puncher tried to quiet him, to push him down on the pillow. But the nester fought him off and, shrieking, raved on about his rights and his money.

Red, devoutly thankful that no one was within earshot, did not give up striving to calm the nester. He did his earnest best, but he might as well have poured oil on a fire. Lorimer roared and bellowed and beat the sides of the bunk with his fists.

"Them ribs o' his must be busted over again by this

time," the perspiring puncher told himself, "so I guess I just gotta be rough an' get done with it."

Taking care not to squeeze the nester's torn shoulder and side, Red, exerting all his strength, forced the nester down on the mattress and held him there. Lorimer perforce lay quietly, but he could still talk and he did.

"I got that money," he kept shrieking eternally. "I got that money, an' it's mine! I'd 'a' killed him, if I'd had to! But I didn't kill him! I dunno who did! They said I did! But I didn't!"

In spite of the fact that Sweetwater Mountain was a lonely spot Red's warm perspiration was succeeded by the cold sweat of apprehension. Suppose some one should ride by. Involuntarily he shivered and quite without intention glanced out of the window. What he saw in the distance was sufficiently unnerving. The fact had been father to the thought, apparently. Topping a rise two miles away was a band of horsemen. They were riding directly toward the ranch-house, and here was Lorimer yelling to high heaven what he had done in a certain affair wherein figured a sum of money. Once let the riders hear a single connected sentence and the nester would be convicted out of his own mouth. Nothing could save him.

Red clapped his hand over Lorimer's mouth and was promptly bitten. The bold Red jerked his hand away and, struck by a sudden idea, darted outside to his horse. All in a stew of haste, he unstrapped his rope and rushed back with it. Working with the speed of one engaged in contest for a prize, he tied down the delirious Lorimer in his bunk and gagged him with the wet towel. When Red was through with him, Lorimer could breathe fairly well and could wiggle his toes. Otherwise he had no freedom of action whatever.

Red looked through the window. The oncoming riders had halved the distance between the rise and the ranch-

house. The puncher, at gaze, heard a slight noise behind him. He whirled about and saw that Miss Lorimer had returned.

He saw too that she was cocking a Winchester, and he read a purpose in her black eyes. There was no time to explain or parley. He sprang straight at her and dashed aside the rifle barrel.

The Winchester went off with a flash and a roar. In that confined space the sound was terrific. Half deafened and coughing in the acrid smoke, Red Kane wrenched the Winchester from the hands of Dot Lorimer, flung the weapon into a corner and seized the lady's hands barely in time to prevent her from dragging out a skinning-knife.

She kicked and clawed like a wild thing entrapped, but he drew one of her arms behind her back in a hammerlock, twisted her body round and, holding her other wrist, pressed his hard forearm against her throat.

"Yuh li'l fool!" he whispered fiercely into her indignant ear, she continuing to struggle, small good though it did her. "Yuh li'l fool! Yore pa was a-raisin' the roof at full shout till you could hear him a mile — all about some money he took an' how he'd do it again an' kill anybody tryin' to stop him! That's why I tied him down an' gagged him! Don't yuh see that posse comin' out yonder? How long do yuh guess yore pa'd last if they heard him a-talkin' like that? I'm yore friend, I tell yuh. If you wasn't a plumb born fool, yuh'd see it. Get a-hold o' yoreself an' have sense, will yuh?"

Here he shook her with such violence that her teeth rattled. Then he sat her down hard on a chair.

"Do yuh understand?" he asked, shaking her again.

She stared up at him, her dark eyes bright with rage. The hoof-patter swelled to a thuttering drum. The horsemen were very near. The rage in her eyes died. She gazed anxiously through the window.

"I understand," she whispered. "I — Oh, they're almost here."

Red Kane loosed his hold upon her at once, ran into the kitchen and, halting in the doorway, fell into an easy, hip-shot, quite-at-home posture. He folded his arms, caressed his chin with steady fingers and regarded the newcomers calmly.

"Lanpher an' the 88," he muttered, "an' lookin' a heap earnest too."

The bunched outfit split like a bursting shell in front of the ranch-house. While some rode to secure the sides and rear of the building, the others, Lanpher in the van, deployed and halted in front of the doorway blocked by Red Kane's lanky-limbed frame.

The drink had not yet died in Lanpher. When it did, he would go to pieces and see things where nothing was. But now he was brave as several lions. He gazed upon Red Kane with a filmy, bloodshot eye. A sneer lifted his upper lip till the white teeth showed beneath. The expressions of the men at his back were heavily determined. Red smiled slowly.

"Howdy, boys," was his greeting. "What brings all yore happy Sunday faces so far from home? An' yore manager too. Ain't yuh afraid the ranch will run away while yo're gone, Lanpher?"

"Where's that nester?" demanded Lanpher.

Red Kane's cheerful grin leaped to meet the other's ominous grimness. He leaned comfortably against the door jamb and pushed back his hat.

"The nester?" he queried in a lazy drawl. "Oh, yeah, shore, the nester. You mean Mr. Lorimer. It's shore good o' yuh to come all this way to see him. He'll appreciate it — when I tell him."

"Yuh needn't bother," said Lanpher. "We'll tell him. We want this nester for rustlin' that money out o' the express box, an' we're gonna have him. You slide out o'

that doorway. I'm gonna go in that house, an' you nor no other man is gonna stop me."

Lanpher dismounted and started toward the door. Rod Rockwell, Slim Mack and a puncher named Moresby followed their manager's example. Tom Dowling remained in the saddle. Red Kane was a friend of his, and Tom knew that Red was careless of consequences when crossed. Let Lanpher do the crossing. Besides, Tom Dowling was beginning to have doubts concerning the nester's guilt. Lanpher insisted that he had the necessary proof, but of honest-to-God specific evidence he had not mentioned a single detailed shred. Tom Dowling sagged back against the cantle and folded his hands on top of the saddle-horn.

As Lanpher and his three men approached the door, Red Kane did not move. In his heart Red expected to die violently within two minutes. To be precise, he allowed himself some sixty seconds of life. He was one individual. The 88 numbered a full score of fairly willing fighting-men. The present moment was far different from that other when Carlson and the crowd from Farewell had arrived with intent to lynch. Then Kansas Casey had been on the ground. Kansas was a hard and willing fighter. And behind Kansas loomed the Majesty of the Law. Ostensibly it had been the girl and what she said at the critical split second that had fended off disaster, but in reality it had been Kansas and his star. Legend to the contrary notwithstanding, men do not relish killing a deputy sheriff. It spells trouble in letters of the largest size.

Yet no hint of Red's grisly expectations appeared in his expression. He continued to smile pleasantly and look at Lanpher with serene, half-closed eyes. Tom Dowling, observant person that he was, perceived that Red, while he still stood with folded arms, had slightly shifted the position of those arms. Red's left hand was

partly hidden by an outstanding fold of his right sleeve. Tom was glad that he had chosen to play a waiting part.

"Not another step!" suddenly rapped out Red, flicking up his left hand.

Lanpher and his three adherents stared into the twin barrels of Red's derringer. But Lanpher was beyond being daunted by even a .50 caliber firearm. A spasm contorted his features, and his right hand flashed downward.

Red Kane immediately shot him through the neck and right arm, and, firing through the bottom of his holster, distributed five bullets among Slim Mack, Rod Rockwell and Moresby. But these three had been hardly slower than Red in getting into action.

Red Kane, hit in four places, felt as if a veil of black mist were descending upon him. He put up a hand to brush away the mist. But the mist was thick and sticky, and in the distance red lightnings flashed and thunder rolled. It was very curious. The sky had been clear a moment ago. How odd that there should be a thunderstorm. He mustn't get his new shirt or Tim Page's handkerchief wet. The colors might run. He should have brought his brother's slicker.

And now a high wind began to blow, and the dark mist swirled and whirled in seething eddies above the face of great waters — great gray waters that stretched away and away as the mist lifted to a dim and curiously engrailed horizon. The mist cleared off completely, and the strange horizon slid nearer, and the points of the engrailing became trees, the chestnut-leaved white-oak of the South.

The waters turned from gray to blue, a blue shot with sparkles that came and went in the play of the sunshine on the ripples.

Hear that regular thump and beat of mighty paddles. The *Star of the West* was coming round a bend. There were her tall twin stacks, with billowy smoke a-trailing,

lifting over the tree-tops. See the white bonnet of steam from her whistle. But you wouldn't hear the long-drawn bellow for several seconds after the steam vanished. Hear it now. Sounds like a bull in a rage, doesn't it? The *General Johnstone* was the only other steamer on the river that had a deeper, louder whistle than the *Star of the West*. But then the former was a New Orleans packet, while the *Star of the West* hailed from Natchez-under-the-Hill.

There was a series of creaks and small crashes at Red's left. He turned his head. A large and energetic razorback was rooting its way beneath the palings enclosing Maje Throstlewit's yard. As he looked, the lean hog squinched through and, a wisp of straw caught in a ragged ear, rushed grunting into Maje's patch of corn. From the house issued Maje's wife, brandishing a broom. At her heels ran Maje, corncob short held between his teeth and sticking right under his nose the way it always did. Some day, if Maje wasn't careful, he'd swallow the stem.

Red laughed to see the pair chase the hog between the cornstalks. Maje was calling the hog names. His wife was panting. Now and then one of the two would manage to whack the pig, and the razorback, amid a flurry of squeals, would tear off at a tangent.

Maje Throstlewit and his wife! It was years since he had seen them. Strange, too, that he should see them, for he had heard that both had lost their lives when the *Modoc's* boilers burst during a race with the *War Eagle*.

The *Star of the West* was steaming on a long slant. She was swinging her gangplank. She was coming in. Hear the bells and the mate bawling at the roustabouts. Pretty extra good mate. It was told of him that he could swear steadily at a fair rate of speed for twelve minutes without repeating himself once. But this was mere hearsay. Red didn't know whether to believe it or not.

Hello, there was his brother Tom coming down to the

landing. He was barefooted, his hat lacked half the brim, and one suspender secured with two horseshoe nails held up his ragged pantaloons. Red glanced down at his own trousers and discovered they were even more ragged than Tom's. He too was barelegged, and one of his big toes wore a dirty bandage made fast with coarse cotton thread.

Tom sat down at his side, and together they watched the steamer make the landing and the passengers come ashore. There was whiskered Colonel Weeks with his fat stomach and his bunch of heavy seals hanging from a fob. He had a handsome daughter, Miss Josephine. Yes, there she was, poke-bonnet and all, holding a tiny parasol over her head. Waiting to welcome her father, the pretty dear. And Brother Jonathan Simms, the local evangelist, with his high hat and burning eyes. Brother Jonathan turned his peculiar, smoldering gaze full upon Red. The eyes grew larger and larger, glowing a brighter and brighter yellow, till, of a sudden, Red saw that they were not the evangelist's eyes but the two lamp-lit kitchen windows of his own home. He was walking toward them through the warm Arkansas dusk. The hellydids and the crickets were busy about their affairs in the wood behind the house, and the frogs were saying " jug o' rum " as hard as they could croak.

He went into the kitchen and found that his mother had saved supper for him as usual. She never failed him — in anything. There was an extra piece of pie, too. My, how good the corn-pone was. Mother's corn-pone never tasted gritty as some folks' did. The cold fried chicken was just about right. He gnawed a luscious drumstick fife-fashion and squared his hard young elbows on the table.

He laid down the drumstick and grinned to think what Tom had missed. Where was Tom anyway? He looked out of the window and saw, instead of Tom, the mid-

summer moon high above the black wedge of the Baptist Church spire.

How distinctly he could see the face of the Man in the Moon. The Man was laughing and winking a great and kindly eye. Subtly the features altered. How much they resembled the features of his friend Tom Dowling, who rode for the 88 ranch. The Man in the Moon stopped winking, and Red saw that he was quite close, in the room, in fact. Why, it wasn't the Man in the Moon at all. It was Tom Dowling. He wasn't two feet away. Red could touch him if he wanted to. He tried to lift an arm. But the arm wouldn't lift. What was the matter with his arms? He couldn't move either of them. He wanted to cry. He had to close his eyes hard and hold them shut tightly for a long minute in order to keep back the tears. When he opened them again, the face of Tom Dowling had disappeared and the face of Dot Lorimer had taken its place. There was not much snap in the black eyes now. They were soft and tired-looking and very, very tender. A sense of delicious peace pervaded Red's whole being.

"This is shore heaven at last," he muttered low, so low that she had to bend her head to catch the words. "This is shore heaven, an' yo're one of the angels."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE STRANGER

FOLLOWED a period of seven days during which Red lay waking little and sleeping much, days through which flitted shadow glimpses of Dot Lorimer and Tom Dowling. At times he would be given queer-tasting liquids to drink. At times his head was bathed in cool water.

On the morning of the eighth day Red opened his eyes on a bright, sharply defined world. Directly above him were the heavy logs of a ranch-house roof. He turned his head sidewise and saw that he was in a bunk set against one end of a small room. At the other end of the room was an open doorway, through which he glimpsed the vista of a much larger room opening into the kitchen. He knew it was the kitchen. He could see the stove. But the view through the doorway interested him not at all. For, beside the doorway of his room, beneath a window, was a heavy homemade table, and at the table, one hand clutching a piece of bread, the other holding a tin cup, sat Dot Lorimer.

Manifestly sleep had overtaken the lady. Her body swayed gently forward and back. Her head was nodding. In through the window streamed the sunbeams and turned the dark hair into a helmet of black and shining metal. It speaks well for Dot Lorimer's good looks that, despite the food, despite the tin cup, despite the head-nodding, she was definitely handsome. Red sighed.

At the slight sound the girl awoke with a start, dropped bread and cup and crossed quickly to the bed.

"How do you feel now?" she asked, laying one hand on his forehead.

"Out o' sight," he replied, mustering up a smile.

"You ought to," she said, smiling in return. "Your fever's all gone, although you had a great deal at first. I kept it down with hickory ash and water as well as I could. Guess you've slept enough so I shan't give you any more henbane. What you need now is a tonic. I wish I had some white-wood bark, but I haven't a bit; I'll have to do the best I can with swamp dogwood. Lie quiet now while I'm in the kitchen. After a while I'll look at your wounds and dress them."

"Lordy!" murmured Red, his eyes following her retreating figure with respect and admiration. "Hickory ash, henbane, swamp dogwood! Regular doctor, she is."

Came in Tom Dowling from the kitchen and sat down beside the bed.

"'Lo, old-timer," grinned Tom, who had dark crescents beneath his eyes and fine lines of weariness at the corners of his mouth. "How you feelum?"

"Like I could dance," said Red. "Whatsa matter with me? I don't seem to hurt much anywhere, considerin'."

"Yo're only shot in four places. Outside o' that they's nothin' the matter with you. But don't yuh worry none. All them bullets sifted through. Every one of 'em's in the kitchen wall right now."

"Seems like I do remember a fraycas," admitted Red, wrinkling his forehead.

"Yo're improvin'," Tom said dryly. "They was a short riot. You had a argument with Lanpher, Slim Mack, Rockwell an' Moresby. You drilled Lanpher twice, an' I did hear how he ain't expected to live, but I guess that ain't true — he's too mean to die, that feller. You put three holes in Slim Mack, busted one of his ribs

an' a arm in two places. Yessir," the bloodthirsty Mr. Dowling continued with relish, "Slim Mack's almost as bad as Lanpher. Rockwell an' Moresby got off easy. Rod only lost the upper half of one ear an' Moresby went shy his right thumb. Tough on Moresby, sort o'. He never could shoot left-handed, an', if he can't learn, he'll be plumb afoot with a six-gun."

"Where did I get it?" Red queried impatiently.

"Both arms, one leg, an' yore shoulder. The lead cut an artery in yore leg, too. She had quite a time with that, Miss Lorimer did, but she made out to sew it up with a harness needle an' thread."

"Yeah? An' I never knowed it? Yo're crazy."

"I ain't crazy, but you was out of yore head alla time. You was delirious an' senseless an' ravin' an' Gawd knows what all for twelve days."

"Twelve days!"

"Twelve whole days from the time you was plugged till yuh got sensible again, an' I dunno as yuh was so sensible at that."

"Twelve days since I was shot," marveled Red.

"Nineteen," corrected Tom Dowling. "She's seven full days since yuh stopped ravin' an' been senseless. Add twelve an' seven an' yuh get nineteen."

But Red's brain was not equal to problems in addition. Besides, another question kept bobbing up and down in his mind.

"Where was the rest o' yore outfit alla time?" he asked. "Why didn't they chime in an' — an' — What are you doin' here, anyhow?" Then, before Tom could make reply, a wave of remembrance came to Red, and he cried sharply: "Did they — was he — did they get him?"

"Him? Who? Oh, you mean Ben Lorimer. Naw, they didn't get him. They — they decided not to."

"They did? What decided 'em?"

"Damfino. How's that sheet feel, Red? Kind o'

ruffled under the ol' chin. I'll fix her. There, that's all right now, huh?"

"Why don't you tell him who stopped them?" inquired from the doorway the quiet voice of Miss Lorimer. "He stopped them, Mr. Kane. They'd have killed you where you lay and undoubtedly would have hung my father if Mr. Dowling hadn't jumped from his horse and persuaded them not to."

"Shucks," muttered Mr. Dowling. "Guess I better go after some water."

He rose and fled past Miss Lorimer to the kitchen and the outer air.

"Of course he's modest about it," went on Miss Lorimer. "He would be. He's that kind. But I turn cold all over whenever I think what surely would have happened if Mr. Dowling hadn't been here. He swore he would shoot the first man that pulled a gun, and I guess they believed him. And he's been here ever since helpin' me."

"Tom's a right good feller," Red told her warmly, "an' — What?"

She had moved close to the bunk and was looking down at him. The fingers of her capable hands were twisting together nervously.

"You — you dud-did more than any one," she stammered. "I — I can't thank you. Words don't count somehow."

It was Red's turn to be uncomfortable.

"I didn't do nothin'," he said, his face and neck prickling hotly.

"You fought for — for us," she continued unsteadily, "when you had no reason to — when you had every reason not to. And — and I thought you were a spy when I saw my father bound and gagged, and I was goin' to shoot you. Oh, you're just wonderful!"

The warm prickling invaded his spinal column.

"Tha's all right," was all he could say. "Tha's all right."

"I wish I could make it up to you. I can't bear to see you sufferin' that way for — for us."

"Lordy, ma'am, I ain't sufferin'. Which I should say not. Sufferin', huh! Ain't you a-takin' care o' me? An' after me handlin' you so rough that time. I shore had to do it, ma'am. It was the only wagon-track out. But I didn't aim to be a bother to yuh like I am now, an' you with yore father sick an' all. How is he feelin' now?"

"He's all right. His rib couldn't have knitted better. The day you were shot was his last bad time. He's been improvin' ever since. He'll be in to see you later on. I make him sit out by the spring in the shade as much as possible. He's there now. While the dogwood bark's boilin', I guess I'll just dress your wounds. And don't you worry about being a bother. Bother indeed!"

In a very workmanlike fashion she took off the bandages, cleansed the wounds, and applied a substance resembling blue sand. This, she informed him, was a mixture of wild indigo root and common brown sugar pounded to powder.

"I was afraid of infection," was her explanation.

It is not to be supposed that he heard her. For embarrassment was consuming him. False embarrassment, to be sure. But it was for all that a most unpleasant sensation.

"I'm awfully sorry it hurts so," she said, remarking the beads of perspiration on his forehead. "I'm almost through."

As a matter of fact, the pain of the dressing was endurable. But he could not have told her so to save his life. He was long past speech. She finished rebandaging, settled his head on the pillow to his liking and hers, and smiled widely.

"You'll do till to-morrow," said she and withdrew to the kitchen.

He could hear a pan cover clink now and then. He could hear her humming to herself. It was a sprightly catch and a merry. She began to whistle the air. It went even better. He wondered what the name might be. When she came in with the dogwood infusion, he asked her.

"Like the tune?" said she, setting the cup on the table. "So do I. It's called 'Chelsea Reach', and it's old as Job's turkey, but there's somethin' about it that sets the blood to spinnin' and the heart to beatin' faster. I'll sing you a song if you like."

He said he would like. So, standing against the wall, without a trace of marring shyness, she gave him "John Peel" in an alto as clear as a bell.

"That's shore a real song," he said, when she had sung it through. "Liked to get up early in the mornin', didn't he, that feller? The last verse is sort o' sad-like. Sound's if Mr. Peel was dead. Is he?"

"I'm afraid he is."

"That's tough. I'll bet I'd 'a' enjoyed knowin' Mr. Peel. I had a dog named Bellman myself once back east in Arkansas. But he fit a bear one time, an' I had to bury him. I wonder, ma'am, could I have a smoke?"

"I don't believe it would hurt you. I'll roll you one."

She went into the next room for tobacco and a paper. While she was gone, Red saw a man ride past the window. The horse was the long-legged gray with the corn coming in his near fore hoof, and the man was the wide-shouldered stranger with the wide, unsmiling mouth. The horseman did not stop at the house. Doubtless he was going to the spring.

The *pad-pad* of the horse's feet ceased abruptly. Arose then the murmur of voices. The stranger was talking to Lorimer. Red could not distinguish more than a word

here and there. He did not try to eavesdrop. But there was no harm in listening, especially when he could do no otherwise.

Miss Lorimer returned slowly, her supple fingers busy with the fashioning of the cigarette. She raised the pencil-thick roll to her mouth, gave it a swift lick down along with the tip of a pink tongue, twisted one end and stuck the other between Red's lips.

"Company for dinner," she told him, giving him a light from a spill she brought in from the kitchen.

"Who is he?" he inquired between puffs.

"He?" She cocked her eyebrows at him, pinching out the spill between finger and thumb. "Oh, you saw him through the window, didn't you? He rode up that side. Lord knows who he is, I don't. Some stranger. Here comes another. No, it isn't either. Why, it's the relative you brought with you the first time you came — your brother. When you were lookin' for rustled horses. Remember?"

His face reddened at the recollection, and she laughed at him over her shoulder as she went out into the kitchen. Tom Kane had dismounted at the door. A moment later the girl ushered him into the sickroom and, departing, closed the door behind her.

Tom let himself down carefully into a chair and grinned at his brother. Tom looked slightly the worse for wear. A bandage gray with dust encircled his head, and it was obvious that he had not shaved for many days. Yet his grin was full of cheer.

"How're they comin'?" he demanded.

"In bunches," replied Red. "You look like you'd met up with a bunch yoreself. What happened?"

"Nothin' much." Tom scraped the floor with the toe of his boot and looked guilty.

"Who you been fightin' with?"

"Well, I guess I got a right to as well as you. Hell's

bells, Red, why didn't yuh tell a feller yuh was gonna go up against that 88 bunch? You poor fool, you ain't fit to be trusted out o' my sight. What do you think you are — a army?"

"How could I tell what I was runnin' into?" defended Red. "I didn't know nothin' about it till it happened."

"An' yuh didn't know nothin' much afterward, Tom Dowling told me when he rid in to Farewell a couple o' days after the fraycas. That was the first I'd heard of it, an' I'd 'a' come right out here instanter, only I wanted to sort o' settle up with the 88 first. Tom said you was in good hands an' he was gonna flock round with yuh an' sort o' lookout yore game for a spell; so I let it go at that an' sashayed out myself after the 88.

"Naturally I had to be careful. They's only one o' me an' a-plenty o' them. But I cut the trail o' two of 'em a week later over near Soogan Creek. I ventilated that freckle-faced Bill Allen through the leg an' downed both their hosses. I was tryin' for a shot at Tile Stanton when that crazy 'Lonzo Peters an' Dan Gildersleeve come whoopin' along an' I had to drag it sharp an' soon. They chased me, o' course, but I worked a Injun trick on 'em comin' through the cottonwoods along the Lazy, an' 'Lonzo bit, an' I nicked him. Plumb through the shoulder, I heard later. That made two, an' the work half done.

"Four days later me an' Bert Kinzie had a party on Packsaddle. Bert burnt the side o' my head a li'l bit, an' I put a hole in his hand an' drilled his arm. This made three. Yuh see, I didn't wanna down nobody. They didn't down you, an' I was only out to play even for the holes in yuh — one gent nicked for every hole. What could be fairer than that? But, o' course, they didn't know I wasn't really serious, an' you better believe they tried to beef me proper. They played cautious too.

Kept a-ridin' round in pairs. I had to walk in the water a lot, you bet.

"But I wasn't in no hurry. I had all the time there is, an' final, yesterday afternoon, I met Dan Gildersleeve slidin' right down Main Street like he owned the town. He seen me first; but his shot missed an' mine didn't. Dan got his jaw an' cheek tore up some, he lost a few teeth, an' he busted his arm. But I didn't have nothin' to do with the arm. He done that himself when he fell off his pony.

"Jake Rule — yeah, the sheriff's back at last — Jake, he got kind o' fussy an' said I'd been a-huntin' trouble all along an' how I'd oughta keep my feuds for out o' town. My feuds! An' Dan shootin' at me first! Well, I told Jake what I thought about it, an' he pulled in his horns. Alla same, I don't guess I'll vote for Jake next election. He's got too much to say for a sheriff."

Tom leaned back in his chair and nodded at Red with keen satisfaction.

"Yo're paid for, old settler," said Tom. "Next time I'll bet them 88 jiggers will look ahead a ways. Yes, sir, I'll gamble they will."

"Yuh idjit," murmured Red affectionately. "You never will learn sense. Bawlin' at me for wrastlin' with a whole outfit when it's plumb necessary, an' then you hop out an' do the same thing when it ain't. Don't talk to me, you catfish. Seen Old Salt? Guess I lost my job with the Bar S all right."

"I did an' you have, but whadda you care? Come in the freightin' business with me. Beats punchin' cows a mile. Yo're y'own boss. They ain't no dog with a brass collar to tell yuh what to do, an' they's money in it — real, shore-'nough money. Nemmine decidin' now. We'll talk about it when yuh get well.

"Man, I had to laugh at Old Salt! He was mad enough to chew nails when he rode in to find out why

yuh hadn't reported an' heard what had happened. Yuh know how his ol' mustache jigs up an' down when he's riled. Well, sir, that set o' whiskers shore kissed his eyebrows in four places. 'This is a helluva note!' he shouts. 'My best puncher laid up!' Yeah, he called yuh that without thinkin'. 'An' a range war started to boot!' blats on Old Salt. 'How'n Gawd's name can a man make money with such goin's-on! An' business was just a-hellin'! Couldn't 'a' been better! Red's fired! He can't never whirl a rope for the Bar S again.' He was shore turned upside down, Old Salt was, an' he had three drinks one after another in the Happy Heart all by himself. Didn't even treat the barkeep."

"A range war!" repeated Red, his gray eyes very serious. "I wonder does he really mean that."

"Guess so," said cheerful Tom. "Them 88 sports are mad clear through. Naturally, you bein' Bar S, they won't feel like huggin' yore side-kickers when they meet. Lively times, old settler, lively times. But, come to think of it, the 88 can't do such a lot. They ain't many of 'em to do it. First an' last you'n me have laid quite a jag o' them boys on the shelf — seven gents an' the manager. Nawsir, they'll be too short-handed for a spell to do more than squall. Old Salt's a fool — bellerin' before he's throwed."

"I didn't go for to start no range war," grieved Red, thinking of his former comrades of the Bar S. "I wouldn't want none of 'em to shuffle off on my account."

"They won't mind that none," declared Tom naïvely. "They know you'd do the same for them any time. Don't let that worry yuh a minute, Red. We're all with yuh, y' bet yuh, an' glad o' the chance. Tom Dowling said himself it was about time somebody put a crimp in Lanpher. . . . Did he quit? Shore he quit. Said he wouldn't work for no such outfit nohow. Guess he'll ride for the Cross-in-a-box. Jack Richie said he'd give

him a job any time. Huh? The jigger on the gray hoss? I didn't come out with him. He was ahead o' me."

"Has he been in Farewell alla time?" queried Red.

"Stayed a week, thassall. Name's Hollister. I heard him askin' for mail one day."

"D'he get any?"

"Not that day." Tom glanced over his shoulder to make sure the door was closed. "Say," he went on, lowering his voice slightly, "you ain't asked her yet, have yuh?"

"Not yet, but when I'm able to sit up, I'm gonna do it too quick. Goin' in business with you, Tommy darlin', is gonna make it a heap easier to support a wife. You dunno how obliged I am to yuh, Tom. I'll try to make it up to yuh some day."

Tommy darling stared blankly at his brother.

"I never thought o' that," he said after a space. "I — yo're still set on marryin' the lady?"

"You bet." For a wounded man the declaration was delivered with convincing snap.

"Well," said Tom, after another brow-wrinkling interval, "she's yore private funeral. An' I guess it won't hurt yore business value none."

When Tom had gone out to unsaddle — for he was staying to dinner — Red's mind reverted uncomfortably to the fact that Dowling had given Lorimer the proper name of Ben. Red began to invent specious reasons why there could not possibly be any connection between the nester and the knife. Began — and gave it up.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

RECOVERY

Of course there was no reason why the unsmiling Mr. Hollister should intrigue Red Kane. But he did intrigue him from the moment that Red, looking through the intervening doorways, saw him take a chair at the Lorimer dinner table.

There was nothing unusual about Hollister. He might have been a puncher, a nester or a cattle buyer. Whatever his trade or profession, he was indubitably an outdoor man. The deep tan of many summers under the sun bore testimony to that. Minus his hat, Hollister displayed a close-cut head of yellow hair.

During the meal Hollister said no word. He champed and chewed unceasingly except when the spirit moved him to drink. In both eating and drinking he was a mighty trencherman before the Lord. He had three heaping helpings of everything, besides nine biscuits and seven cups of coffee. Red knew. He kept count. In a land where men ate rather more than less, Hollister's appetite was remarkable. Red wondered where he found room to stow it all. For Hollister was not in the least fat. As has been said, his body was slim. No woman of fair size need have been ashamed to possess a waist the size of Hollister's.

Immediately after the meal Hollister took horse and departed eastward. Red was told by Miss Lorimer when she brought him in a most nourishing drink concocted of raw eggs, condensed milk and water.

"I didn't hear any hens a-cacklin'," said Red, when she had wiped his mouth.

"Bless you, we haven't a chicken on the place. Your brother brought them with him from Farewell. Wasn't it thoughtful of him?"

Red agreed that it was. Tom, it appeared, was still in a state of thoughtfulness. He was sitting on a rock beyond the spring, his elbows on his knees and his head in his hands.

"When I asked him if he had cramps," said the direct Miss Lorimer, "and couldn't I give him a drink of whisky, he said, 'No, he was just restin'.' Funny way to rest, sittin' down on a hard rock. Easy now, while I slide my hand under your head. I want to plump up your pillow for you. Are you sure your brother's all right? Maybe that graze is deeper than it seems."

"They's nothin' the matter with Tom," Red assured her. "He's only got somethin' on his mind, an' he's a-workin' it out. That's the way he always does when he thinks — sits on somethin' hard an' wrastles his head with both hands."

When Miss Lorimer went back to the kitchen, Red puzzled his brain as to what Tom could be thinking about. He knew it was not the feud with the 88. Tom was not the man to brood on or worry over that.

Red, his mental exercise acting as a soporific, presently dozed off. He slept the long warm afternoon away and awoke in the dusk of the evening. A shaded lamp stood on the table. In the chair sat Tom Dowling. He was making cigarettes. There was a pile of them beside the lamp. Dowling looked up at the slight sound of Red's stirring.

"Miss Lorimer says yuh can smoke all you want," said Dowling, getting up and coming to the bunk. "I had a lot made this afternoon, but Tom he glommed the bunch, an' I never found it out till after he'd gone. Yeah, he's

went. Told me to tell yuh he'd be out again soon's he could. Here's a smoke for baby. Open the li'l mouthy, that's a good girl. Drag at it now with the li'l ol' bellows. Thassa boy. . . . Where's she at? Gone huntin' some kind o' Injun yarb for yore scratches an' another brand o' bark to bile up for yuh to drink. Say, what she dunno about doctorin' you could write on yore fingernail, an' yore littlest one at that.

"Gawd knows where she found that wild indigo an' dogwood. They ain't none growin' round here I ever heard tell of. She's a six-ply wonder, that lady. Why, Red, one time you wouldn't believe how you was carryin' on — yellin' an' hollerin' all about a Maje Throstlewit gent an' a razor-back hawg an' the *Queen o' the West* an' corn-pone an' fried chicken till yuh made my mouth water just to listen to yuh — you was carryin' on an' bouncin' round, an' I was gonna tie yuh down before yuh busted them bullet holes open. But Miss Lorimer wouldn't have nothin' like that. Not her. She takes some o' this yarb an' a pinch o' that bark an' wood ashes — ordinary wood ashes — an' biles it up an' cools it off an' throws that into yuh. An' you don't holler more'n three minutes after. Nawsir, Red, you start a-millin' right then, an' pretty quick yo're all bedded down quiet an' asleep.

"If I knowed as much thataway as she does, I'd be all swelled up like a poisoned pup. But not her; she just acts like she don't know nothin'. I tell yuh, she can walk all over me any time an' I'll enjoy it. An' that's the kind o' hairpin I am."

Red's eyebrows drew together. Of course Miss Lorimer was all that Tom Dowling said she was. But it wasn't in the least necessary for Tom to praise her to Red. It was none of Tom's business. What did the poor fool mean anyway? Why couldn't he shut up?

Which was ungrateful of Red and unjust to Tom Dowling. But Red was a sick man, and the sick are by

their very nature prone to magnify trifles. Was it possible that Tom was falling in love with Miss Lorimer? Indeed it was more than possible. Why not? It would be strange if that which Red considered beautiful did not find favor in the eyes of other men. And Tom Dowling had eyes. Oh, most certainly he had eyes.

Red lay, wretched and jealous while Tom Dowling talked on, and cursed the luck that held him lapped in bandages. What chance had a bedridden invalid against a man who was up and about? To make love with any likelihood of succeeding one must have the use of one's arms — of one hand at the least. And Red Kane could barely wiggle his fingers. The handicap was rather overwhelming.

Under the circumstances it is no wonder that when Miss Lorimer returned from her herb-gathering she found Red Kane in a high fever. She sent Tom Dowling packing, insisting in the face of his strong denial that he had in some manner unknown to her excited the patient.

"I don't care," she said, as she shooed him into the kitchen. "I don't mind your talkin' to him. There's no harm in that, but he mustn't be got all hot and worked up. I won't have it, and I don't want to hear any excuses either. The idea! I leave him cool and restin' easy, and I come back and find him restless as a cat and soaked with perspiration. You're a fine person to leave in charge. A fi-ine person, I must say. Don't you go in there again without my permission. That's for you too, Dad! . . . What? No, I don't care if you haven't been in yet. You can't see him now. To-morrow mornin' perhaps."

"Y'act as if we was kids!" her father cried indignantly.

"That's all you are," she shot back. "That's all any man is — just a big overgrown kid, and the quicker you realize that important fact the better."

"'Fact — important,'" he repeated. "Quit that there book-talkin', Dot. I don't like it."

"You be satisfied if I drop my g's."

"Who's boss round here?" demanded Lorimer, his black eyes twinkling.

"I'm boss, and don't you forget it for a minute."

"I guess yo're right at that," he admitted with a rueful grin.

"You bet I'm right. Here! don't lean sidewise. Bend forward when you want to pick anythin' off the floor. You won't be able to fool with that rib for a week yet. Boss! I should say so! If you didn't have one, I don't know what would become of you."

"Now see what yuh done, Dot, talkin' hard thataway," remonstrated her father. "You've scared Dowling so he's gone out to the corral. He thinks you mean all them words. He dunno how real skimmerin' gentle you are inside."

"Oh, I'm gentle, am I? Shows how much you know about me. Sidown, Pa, do, till I get the table set."

A capable person, Dot Lorimer, as any one may see.

Red Kane listened to her talk and smiled gently to himself. There was a girl for you! I should say so. No nonsense about her. Not a bit. She'd look after a man. Gentle? Of course she was. You could tell that with half an eye. Tom Kane was a fool. The more he thought about it the more he realized how much of a fool Tom Kane was.

"I'll have the laugh on Tom yet," Red told himself. "Yes, sir, I'll shore make Tom eat his words without salt."

Tom Dowling, however, remained a large fly in Red's mustard. For Dowling, if he had been scared out to the corral as reported by Lorimer, had gotten bravely over his fright. He was much in the girl's company. Frequently Red heard them laughing together. To Red

these sounds of merriment were as the chuckling of fiends in the Pit. Had he been able, he would have writhed. But what he did not do physically he did mentally till his teeth chattered.

But always these periods of torture and bitter depression would be dispelled by the lady herself, who would bring Red a cool drink and plump up his pillow and cheer him with old songs that, through her, he had learned to love. And they would talk together of many things, the little common things of which are built the lives and loves and hopes of this our world. She told him stories too, — stories of men and women dead and dust these many hundred years.

Of all these tales he liked the best the ones that dealt with *Robin Hood,* an outlawed bowman who did a thriving trade on the pad. Merry Robin was a favorite with Miss Lorimer, it appeared, and she took pains to make the archer live again for her listener.

" So you see," she said one day, at the end of the story wherein Robin shoots against the foresters and kills a man, " he was not really wicked. He had no desire to leave his home, his people, and become an outlaw in the greenwood. But he had no choice, don't you see. He was forced — forced by circumstances. And," she went on, her eyes cast down upon her sewing, " I think that's the way it is in real life sometimes. A man doesn't mean to do wrong, but, with the best intentions in the world, he does do wrong. Then again, there are times when a man, without having done a thing out of the way, is absolutely compelled to become an outlaw. A man must fight fire with fire. Bother! I've snapped my thread again." She knotted the thread and raised her eyes to his a fleeting instant. " You believe that, don't you, about fighting fire with fire? "

" Y'bet yuh," he told her fervently.

In his then state he would have believed anything she

wanted him to believe. After all, why not? What sort of man is he who cannot see eye to eye with his heart's desire? He is not in love, be sure of that.

"Ma'am," he said suddenly, "is that Tom Dowling round?"

"No, he's out back of the corral with Dad. Why?"

"Will you marry me?"

She leaned back in her chair and looked at him steadily. A tiny smile lurked at one corner of her mouth, a dimple at the other.

"I — I —" she began, and stopped, her upper lip caught between her teeth.

"I don't mean now this minute," he cut in hastily. "When I get well."

"I'm afraid you're a little feverish," she said promptly, and stretched out a cool hand and laid it on his forehead.

"I ain't feverish," he exclaimed with impatience. "Will you?"

The lurking smile became a laugh. She crossed her knees, clasped her hands and swung a foot.

"Are you sure you know what love means?"

"Shore I am. Why wouldn't I?"

"I'm not so sure you do. They say a man always falls in love with his nurse."

"Who says so?" he demanded in wrath.

"Everybody. But it doesn't matter. What I have to be sure of is your end of it. I must be absolutely sure that you love me."

"Ain't I tellin' yuh I love yuh? What more do yuh want?"

"You may only think you're sure."

"If I could walk an' use my arms I'd quick show yuh whether I loved yuh or not. Just because I'm a-layin' here all crippled up, yuh —"

"Walkin' and usin' your arms haven't a thing to do

with it, not a thing. Love is not to be lightly entered into, and —"

"I ain't enterin' it lightly. I done told yuh the second time I met yuh I was gonna marry yuh, an' I'm gonna do it."

"Oh, no doubt you find me attractive. That's natural. There aren't many women in this country, and a girl with passable good looks is always considered a beauty. You're young and impressionable. You meet me and tumble hard. But it doesn't mean anything. I know these love-at-a-glance affairs. They're in and out like a dipping tank. In a year you'd either have forgotten me or would want to forget me. Suppose we're married. What then? Wouldn't I be in a fine fix?"

She looked at him as severely as she was able.

"Do yuh know somethin'?" said he. "I believe yo're lovin' me alla time."

"What!"

"Shore. Yuh gimme too many reasons against it for 'em to be natural. Yuh don't mean a word of it, not a word. If yuh didn't care nothin' about me, yuh'd 'a' said 'No' an' been done with it. Lordy, I wish I could move these here arms."

"I didn't say a word about myself," she observed calmly. "I didn't say I couldn't love you, you know. It may be that I could love you — I've always had a weakness for red hair. Yes, it's quite possible."

She nodded to him and smiled again and continued to swing her foot.

"Could you love me?" he asked, controlling his voice by an effort.

"Oh, yes, I could love you. I'm reasonably sure of that."

"Then if you could love me an' I do love you, I don't see what's to stop our gettin' married."

"Now we're back where we started. 'Could' and

'do' aren't the same by a long mile. Before I marry you, or any one, I must first be sure that I am more to them — to him, I mean, or you — than a passin' fancy. You see, in this I'm thinkin' of them — him or you. As a wife I'd do my best to make my husband happy, but as a passin' fancy I'd make my husband wish he'd never been born. It's all or nothin' with me. Oh, I'm a jealous cat when I have reason, and I'd be liable to throw things. How'd you like it if I should hit you in the eye with a plate?"

"You sound like my brother," he told her seriously.

"Your brother?"

"That's the way he talks — against marriage. But I always tell him he dunno what he's talkin' about, the poor fool, the way I'm tellin' you now."

"You mean I'm a poor fool?" Her voice shook with mirth.

"You know well enough what I mean. I mean you'll never heave no crockery at me. 'Cause why? 'Cause you'll never have reason. Yuh can shake yore head all yo're a mind to. I know what I know, an' I know what I'm gonna do when I get well. I'll make you see that I love you, an' I'll make yuh admit yuh love me right out loud an' plain. What's fairer than that?"

The lady put her head on one side and regarded him steadfastly.

"We'll see," she said presently. "We'll see."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

THIN ICE

Red, convalescing, was sitting on the bench outside the kitchen door with Lorimer. Red's wounded leg was stretched straight out. The bullet had made a jagged wound, and there was still danger of bursting it open. But Red's arms and shoulder, beyond a slight twinge or stiffness now and again, were completely whole. So nearly recovered was he that Tom Dowling had gone to his waiting job at the Cross-in-a-box.

In front of the two men on the bench were lined up on horseback the sheriff, Jake Rule, Kansas Casey, his deputy, and a man named Bill Derr, half owner of a ranch south of Seymour. Mr. Derr, a person of even taller, leaner build than the nester Lorimer, was said to know more concerning the territorial criminal element than twenty sheriffs. His work had been, and at times still was, man-hunting. He was engaged to Miss Blythe, Mike Flynn's partner in the Blue Pigeon.

Now Bill Derr turned his washed-out gray eyes on the two officers of the law and laughed shortly. Kansas and Jake looked sheepish.

"I guess I gotta make allowances for you fellers," said Derr, to the enjoyment of the spectators on the bench and the listening girl in the kitchen, "but I dunno why yuh didn't write for a fuller description of this Hudson gent before draggin' me north. You'd 'a' saved us all trouble. I wouldn't mind if Mister Lorimer was John Hudson, 'cause John rustled one o' my ponies once, but,

when he don't even look like him, it shore gives me a pain."

"The county'll pay the bill!" cried the stung sheriff.

"You bet it will," said Bill Derr, "an' I won't be none easy on it neither."

At this juncture there appeared on the top of the ridge to the west what was apparently a riderless horse. On its nearer approach it was discovered to be ridden by a small and hatless boy. The horse galloped in and slid to a halt. The small boy, one of Calloway's youngsters, panting with excitement and the rush of his ride, straightened his bare legs and wiped his exceedingly dirty face on his sleeve. His mount, white with lather where leather or blanket touched its hide, soaked with sweat elsewhere, stood with spread legs and dropped head. Its flanks heaved like hard-pumped bellows, and its red nostrils blew in and out.

"You'n Kansas are wanted instanter, Sheriff!" shrilled the small boy, pop-eyed with importance.

"What for?" asked Jake Rule, for young Calloway was not manifesting the respect due his office.

"You'll see," replied the small boy. "The stage's been held up again south o' Injun Ridge an' they robbed the Gov'nor o' the Territory of his gold watch an' all his money an' he's wild an' he wants to see you right away."

The small boy bobbed his head in emphasis and sat up stiffly. It is not given to every young man to carry messages for a governor. Dignity swelled the chest of him till his damp shirt stretched alarmingly.

The sheriff and the deputy stared stupidly.

"You mean the Gov'nor was in the stage?" Jake Rule inquired in stricken tones.

"Shore," yawped the child, wriggling bare toes, "an' he was robbed an' he wants to see you an' Kansas. He's mad, you bet. Y'oughta hear him. He's cussin' an' swearin' like all gitout. He's got it in for you an' Kan-

sas. He said you wasn't no good, either o' yuh, or yuh'd shore wipe these road agents out."

The last sentence ended in a full-lunged shout, for Rule and his deputy had started on their return trip. And they traveled at speed. Young Calloway looked at the three men and laughed infectiously.

"That Gov'nor man will shore crawl their humps," said he.

"Slide off, sonny," invited Miss Lorimer. "I have a piece of pie for you."

"I ain't 'sonny'," denied the boy, tilting a snub nose. "I'm Sam Brown Calloway. What — what kind o' pie is it?"

"Dried apple. Do you like candy?"

Sam Brown Calloway did not hesitate. He was dignified no longer. He slipped to the ground and spatted into the kitchen.

Bill Derr slouched forward, his forearms braced across the saddlehorn. There was unholy mirth in his washed-out gray eyes.

"The Gov'nor held up," he chuckled. "That's a real joke."

"Y'bet yuh," said Red. "I heard him make a speech once about how tame the West was gettin'. Guess he'll have to make him a new speech now."

"He'll just about snatch the sheriff baldheaded," contributed Lorimer.

"An' serve him right," averred Red. "Bill, why don't you get in on this?"

"Time enough when they ask me. After all, Jake an' Kansas oughta be able to curry this hoss."

"They'd oughta," assented Red. "Oh, they'd oughta all right, but will they? An' another thing: Can they?"

"If they don't yuh'll have a new sheriff. Do I see a spring over yonder? I do. Hoss, get a-goin'. I'm thirsty."

"You dropped yore knife, missis." It was the voice of Sam Brown Calloway speaking to Miss Lorimer.

"It isn't mine, dear. Why, how funny! It has dad's initials."

At this Red hastily stuffed both hands into the pockets of his trousers and explored with his fingers. In the bottom of the right-hand pocket was a hole. A knife, were it so minded, could easily slip through this hole. Red damned the child under his breath.

"Whatsa matter?" asked Lorimer. "Leg hurt?"

"Bit my tongue," lied Red, his ears pricked for further revelations.

These came presently.

"Here's a dime in the corner," announced the clear young voice. "Did yuh lost a dime, missis?"

"No, dear, I didn't. Ask my fa — Why, it has the same initials the knife has. This *is* queer."

"What's this?" asked Lorimer, leaning round the corner of the door jamb. "What did yuh find with my initials on it?"

Sam Brown Calloway brought him the broken jackknife and the dime.

"They yor'n, mister?" he asked.

Lorimer held the two articles in the palm of his hand and fingered them curiously.

"Now ain't that amazin'," said he. "My initials an' everythin'."

"Lessee." Red peered over his shoulder, making a show of hunting through various pockets. "I lost them," he went on in a tone of great surprise. "I never knowed it till this minute. Got a hole in my pocket."

He stretched out a hand for the jackknife and the dime. Before he could touch them, the shadow of Bill Derr's horse fell across the bench.

"Where," asked Bill Derr, "did yuh get John Hudson's knife?"

Red's hand paused in mid-air. Then he continued the motion and picked up the jackknife and the dime. He did not look at Lorimer, although he knew that Lorimer's black eyes, narrowed to glittering slits, were fixed on his face. He looked down at what he held and turned over the dime so that the two initials were uppermost.

"Here," said he, holding up his hand toward Derr. "Is the dime Hudson's too?"

Bill Derr leaned from the saddle, took the jackknife and the dime and examined them minutely. There was a tight-strained silence for the moment. Red, with every appearance of an ease he did not feel, smoothed down his ruffled hair. Bill Derr handed back the knife and dime. He gave Red an odd look.

"They're John Hudson's all right," he declared. "I've seen Hud whittlin' with that very knife. He was a great feller to whittle. Always a-doin' it — when he wasn't doin' somethin' else. Here's somethin' he whittled." He fished from a vestpocket a beautifully finished little wood-carving of an Indian girl's head and held it up between thumb and forefinger for all to see. "He gimme this once, an' I've always kep' it, it's — it's so sort o' cunnin' like. Not that I got any use for Hud — now. This here dime with the initials," he went on, dropping the carving back into his pocket, "is a pocket-piece o' his. Lucky piece, he called it. I've been playin' cards with him, an', when the luck would go against him, he'd cross his fingers an' feet, take this dime out an' spin her three times. He said it brought him luck. I dunno as it ever did, though."

"Seems like you knowed him pretty well, Bill." Red returned Derr's odd look with interest.

"I'd oughta. He only lived five mile north o' my shack. We was right friendly, the tarrapin, till he sloped with my hoss an' some other gent's cattle, so yuh needn't go lookin' cross-eyed at me thataway."

Red laughed outright and stuck his tongue in his cheek.

"Sun was in my eyes," said he. "What I'd like to know is where the B L fits in. If his name's John Hudson, why ain't it J H?"

"Brand," explained Bill Derr. "B L was his iron. He only owned three hosses an' a dog, but he had a brand alla same just like he was somebody."

Red turned toward Lorimer and smiled.

"For a minute I guess you thought I was this John Hudson gent, didn't yuh?" asked Red Kane.

"Shore not," Lorimer assured him. "I — I guess I'll have a smoke."

He hid his confusion in the business of cigarette making. Red winked at Bill Derr.

"If I ain't too personal, Red," said the latter, "would you mind tellin' me where an' when you found them things?"

"I found —" began Red, then stopped abruptly, for it struck him that if he replied truthfully Bill Derr would undoubtedly wish to know why he hadn't reported his find to the proper authorities.

It was obviously impossible to explain that he had refrained because he had suspected Lorimer. To make a bad business worse, Lorimer was beginning to think in another direction. Red guessed as much by the rigidity of his body and the tapping of his fingers on the edge of the bench. The ice was very brittle. In places it was cracking.

"G'on," urged Derr.

"No," Red said firmly, bound to reach shore if he could. "Nemmine where I found them things. I know yore li'l game, Bill. Yo're on the lookout for the reward. Yeah, well, I'm tellin' yuh, cowboy, if they's any reward comin', I'm gonna glom onto it. Yessir, li'l ol' me myself. Maybe I'll let Tom in on it. I dunno yet. But

anyway, it's gonna stay right in the Kane family where it'll do the most good."

"Hawg," said Derr. "I'd be ashamed to be so greedy."

"Then what you wanna know for?" demanded Red.

To which question there was no answer.

When Bill Derr, together with Calloway's child, had ridden away toward Farewell, Lorimer squinted up at the sky and coughed.

"Funny how them things had my initials on 'em," he observed.

"Yeah," drawled Red. "Ain't it?"

"Yeah, it is. Damn funny. You didn't know they was my initials, did yuh?"

"How could I know?" Red turned the most innocent eyes in the world on the other man. "You'd never told me yore front name. An' yore daughter always called yuh 'Pa.'"

This was skinning the cat both ways with a vengeance, yet truth was unashamed. No lawyer could have contrived it better.

"Yo're right, I didn't," admitted the nester. "Tom Dowling called me Lorimer, too, I remember."

"Shore. Lookit, don't you guess if I'd knowed yore initials I'd 'a' said somethin'? Lordy, man, why wouldn't I say somethin'? Why wouldn't I, huh? Say, what are you drivin' at?"

"And you'd better be sure and certain about it before you start drivin', Pa," cut in Dot Lorimer, leaning over the window sill. "You know yourself you jump at conclusions too much."

"I guess I'm a fool," said Lorimer. "I'm too hasty, maybe. No hard feelin's?"

"I dunno of any." Red shook his head.

"That'll be good. Dot, how 'bout a couple o' them doughnuts just to keep us from fallin' in till dinner?"

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

THINNER ICE

It was a week later. Mr. Lorimer had taken one of the wagons and gone to Sweetwater Mountain to cut wood. He was getting in the winter's supply.

Red, now quite recovered — he was leaving for Farewell in the morning — sat cross-kneed on a sack beside the spring and watched Miss Lorimer darning socks. She was sitting on a chair he had made for her out of a strip of canvas torn from an old wagon cover, and peeled young cottonwood trunks.

The sun shone in a blue and cloudless sky. But it was not hot. A vagrom breeze was shaking the tops of the cottonwoods, and the leaves were flittering and rustling with pleasant little snaps and crackles. The play of the leaves made a play of lights and shadows on the head and figure of Miss Lorimer. There was one small patch of sun at the corner of her mouth that came and went with the dimple there. Red watched with fascinated eyes.

"Say," he remarked suddenly, "have you seen anythin' o' my green handkerchief?"

"I saw it," she replied with meaning.

"Where? I had it yesterday, but she was gone this mornin'. Where'd I put it anyway?"

"You hung it on the back of a chair. I put it away where it would be safe."

"Safe? Whyfor safe?"

She lifted her dark eyes. There was an amused twinkle in their cool depths.

"I couldn't stand it any longer," she told him. "I just couldn't. It used to set my teeth on edge to watch you wear that vivid green thing with your gray shirt speckled with those horrible purple horseshoes."

"Horrible?" His face fell.

"Horrible. Heavens, Red, don't you know that green and purple swear at each other?"

"Swear?" He was still over his head.

"Clash, then. The two colors don't go together. They're awful, Red. Honestly."

"Tom did say them an' my red head together would be kind o' bright," he admitted. "But I thought they was pretty. I liked them purple hoss-shoes, an' that green sort o' set 'em off like."

"You bet it set 'em off. It's a wonder they didn't explode. Promise me not to wear that green handkerchief with that shirt, won't you?"

"Shore I will. Anythin' you say goes. If them colors don't hitch, they don't thassall. Can I wear the shirt?"

She smiled adorably. "The shirt'll pass — the horseshoes aren't so strikin' as they were. They faded in the washin'. It made the gray streaky a little, too. I'm sorry. I couldn't help it."

"Thassall right. Don't let that worry yuh. Them hoss-shoes was always too bright, an' I like my shirt streaky. You needn't laugh. I do, honest. Lordy, think o' you knowin' them colors didn't ride together. An' me thinkin' they was all right alla time. I'm ignorant. I know it. I guess now that's one of the reasons you think I don't love yuh — 'cause I bulge right ahead doin' what I oughtn't to do. I guess that's one o' the reasons shore-'nough."

"Oh —" she began hesitatingly.

"I can see," he said. "I got eyes. Yo're different. You think different. You talk different. Yo're educated. I've noticed it. I never had much time for schoolin'."

"That isn't it, at all," she told him.

"There y'are. I'd 'a' said 'ain't', an' you know it. I say 'them things' too, an' you don't. You can shore make the dictionary sit up an' beg, an' I never could in a million years. Yessir, Dot, all them things is what counts with a girl like you, an' —"

"I *did* hurt your feelin's," she exclaimed contritely. "I know I did. I didn't mean to. Oh, I'm a selfish girl. I — I don't mean to be."

She looked at him with a grieving wistfulness.

"Never think it," he assured her. "You didn't hurt my feelin's, not a smidgin. You can't help bein' educated an' different. But I love you, an' I'm gonna show yuh none o' them things count for such a much. What does it matter if I wear a red an' yaller shirt with a pair o' pink pants an' say 'not no' an' 'them is' forty to the minute? What does the like o' that matter if I love yuh so hard I wanna cut the throat of anybody who looks at yuh? What does it now?"

"It does matter — a little. If you really loved me, you'd want to do what I — I liked."

"But I do. Lordy, I — Yuh mean to say yuh want me to talk grammar an' not wear shirts o' funny colors, an' —"

"If you loved me, you'd want to."

"If? They ain't no 'ifs.' Never an 'if.' Nawsir. Here's where I start in goin' easy on the rainbow, but I dunno how I'm gonna teach old words new tricks without yo're round to show me. But you'll be round alla time one o' these fine spring mornin's, so don't let that worry yuh. Honest, I'll swing an' rattle with that dictionary four hours a day if you say so. I'll do anythin'

bar nothin' to make yuh happy. I'll show you. You watch my smoke."

He nodded a confident head and grinned.

"Sometimes I think perhaps you do love me," she said, giving him a troubled look.

"Yo're gonna think so alla time. An', when you do, I'm gonna kiss you so hard you won't be able to breathe for a week."

"Why don't you do it now?" Her black eyes held his gray ones steadily.

"You ain't ready yet. If you was, you wouldn't ask me no questions."

"You must have had lots of experience," she said, a trifle disconcerted.

"Not me. What li'l I know I got by hearsay an' mainstring. An' I know better'n to kiss you now. I'd spoil everythin' if I did. Yuh needn't look disappointed. 'Cause y'aint disappointed. Not a bit. Can't fool this orphan child by gogglin' at me under yore eyewinkers either, you sassy rascal."

He bobbed his head at her and patted Juba on his knees.

"Tell yuh somethin' else," he said jerkily, for his hands were thumping furiously, "yo're gonna kiss me first."

"I am."

"You, Dot Lorimer, are. I done said it."

"You say quite a lot, young man. I don't know when I've heard any one talk so much."

"'Clack, clack,' goes the ol' millwheel, huh? Don't yuh care. Better times comin'. I'm goin' home to-morrow. Then you'll be sorry for treatin' me so cruel. Yep, you'll shore miss this cowboy. Don't cry too hard."

"I'll try not to," she said with a mock sniff, and she bit off a thread with a snap of white teeth.

She held up a mended sock by the toe, shook out the egg-shaped darning-gourd from the heel and laid the sock

across her knee. She did not immediately take up another but sat with head bent and smoothed and smoothed with deliberate fingers the one on her knee.

Suddenly she raised her head and met Red's eyes. She loked at him gravely.

"Red," said she — they had been Dot and Red to each other for a week — "where did you really find that broken jackknife and the dime?"

He did not attempt to evade her questioning as he had that of Bill Derr.

"In Farewell," he told her.

"Whereabouts in Farewell?"

"Between the express office an' the company's corral."

"After the robbery or before?"

"After."

"What did you think when you found it?"

"Why —uh — I dunno." He was faltering in his stride.

"It would be natural for you not to think, wouldn't it? Oh, yes, very natural. You know perfectly well you wondered what my father's first initial was. Now be honest. Didn't you? Look at me. There's nothin' of interest for you on the ground, and you've seen your feet a million times. Look me in the eye. Didn't you?"

"Maybe I did." He looked her in the eye as ordered, but it was hard work.

"Did you know his name was Benjamin?"

"Not then."

"But you found it out later?"

"Yeah."

"Then you did suspect my father. I know you must have, or you'd have mentioned havin' found a knife with his initials. You needn't shake your head. There was a shred or two of suspicion in your mind. There must have been. Otherwise you wouldn't be human. Oh, I knew. Why do you suppose I cut in when Dad was

askin' you if you knew his name was Benjamin, if I didn't know? My Lord, you'd have given the whole show away and gotten yourself shot good and plenty if I'd let you go on talkin'. You're not a good liar, Red. You're only fair, and that's almost as bad as tellin' the truth. Sooner or later the only fair liar is caught just as I caught you. Don't look so crestfallen, boy. You can't fool a woman with lies — ever. Remember Eve ate of the apple before Adam did, and women have been that much ahead of men ever since. I would — "

Abruptly she stopped speaking and looked over the top of Red's hat with slightly narrowed eyes. Red turned a quick head. A man was rounding the corner of the corral. He was coming in their direction. The man was Kansas Casey. He advanced with a smile and took off his hat to the girl.

Red did not smile in return. He replied with a grave "Hello, Kansas", to the other's greeting and watched him alertly. Red could not have named the exact cause — certainly Casey's manner was markedly friendly — yet Red was oppressed with a vague unease, an unease that grew stronger with every breath he drew.

Why had Kansas not let his presence be known before he slid round the corner of the corral? What was his purpose in coming to the ranch-house by stealth? Why all this furtive foxiness? Why?

"Whyfor this Injun business?" inquired Red, cutting straight to the heart of the matter.

"Injun business?" Kansas cocked a quizzical eyebrow at Red.

"Shore, Injun business. This driftin' in so soft an' quiet we didn't hear nothin' till yuh stuck yore head round the corner of the corral. Had yuh been waitin' at that corner long?" This last at a venture, and it seemed to strike the black, for the eyelids of Kansas Casey twitched the least bit.

"What makes yuh think I was waitin' at that corner — long or a-tall?" he asked.

"I was just a-wonderin', thassall," drawled Red. "*I* wonder a lot now an' then."

"Yeah." Thus Kansas, with a rising inflection.

His smile became quizzical, and he looked at Red as one looks at a small child. The tolerance in his expression was as obvious as it was maddening. He held out his hand.

"S'pose you gimme that knife, Red," he suggested, "an' the dime too, while yo're at it."

The deputy's choice of words was unfortunate. Red, already peevish, took instant umbrage.

"An' s'pose I don't do nothin' like that?" Red's drawl became more pronounced.

"Then I'll have to take 'em away from yuh."

The deputy's smile had not vanished. It had grown fixed as set concrete, and his eyes were sharply determined.

Red gave a short hard laugh.

"*You'll* take 'em away from *me?*" said he. "You'll take 'em away from *me?* What makes you think you will?"

"Don't be a fool, Red," urged Kansas. "That knife an' dime are evidence. I'm tryin' to do this peaceable, but I want them two things an' I'm gonna have 'em."

Red hesitated. He knew Kansas was in the right, but Kansas had sneaked up on him, Kansas had rubbed him the wrong way. He felt that Kansas was making him cut a poor figure before his lady. This was vanity. Out of the corner of his eye he stole a quick glance at Miss Lorimer. She was motionless, and she was watching Kansas like a cat. Red thought her face had gone a trifle pale. But he could not be sure, she was so brown.

Red grinned suddenly at Kansas and stuck jaunty thumbs in the armholes of his vest.

"Do yuh want them things now," he asked, "or will yuh wait till yuh get 'em?"

"Stop playin' the fool, Red," admonished Kansas. "This is serious. You don't seem to realize none how serious it is. Shucks, Red, I ain't lookin' for trouble, can't yuh see that? If it was anybody else but you, I wouldn't waste my time talkin'. I'd —"

"What would yuh do?" interrupted Red. "I hope yuh wouldn't do nothin' rash. Yuh wouldn't hurt me, would yuh? I might get offended if yuh did."

"Red, you idjit, look yonder," snapped Casey, with a jerk of his thumb toward the ranch-house.

Red looked where he was bidden. On the bench beside the kitchen door sat a lengthy citizen of Farewell, one Shorty Rumbold. Shorty's rifle lay across his knees. The barrel was pointing in the general direction of Red Kane and Miss Lorimer.

Red's gaze returned to Kansas Casey.

"Y'oughta know better'n to use Shorty for that," said he. "Yuh know what a poor shot he is. He might hit the lady instead o' me."

"He might," put in Kansas softly, "but I won't. S'pose now you keep them thumbs hooked right where they are. I hate to do this, Red, but yo're so mulish I gotta."

Red stared unmoved into the muzzle of Casey's six-shooter.

"I'd like to —" he began.

"He ain't here, Kansas!" called a voice from a window of the ranch-house. "Where's he at?" pursued the voice. "Yore dad — where is he, miss?"

"So that's it, is it?" said Red, glaring at Kansas. "The sheriff's gettin' active, huh? The old coot! Mighty smart, yuh think y'are, don't yuh, a-holdin' us here with yore chatter while the sheriff an' the rest of 'em sifts in an' searches the house, huh? Mighty smart.

Who's the stranger? Two strangers — three! What are they hornin' in for?"

Three strangers had followed the sheriff out of the kitchen. For, hearing no reply to his shouted question, the sheriff was coming to close quarters. Red, taking care to keep his thumbs hooked, slowly rose to his feet.

Miss Lorimer did not rise. Deliberately she dropped the sock she had been smoothing into the basket on the ground beside her chair, crossed one unconcerned knee over the other and stifled a yawn with her pretty hand. The yawn brought to a graceful conclusion, she tucked in a loose tendril of hair behind an ear and clasped her hands, right thumb over left, in her lap.

The sheriff, standing in front of the girl, took off his hat to her and achieved a jerky bow. Then he pulled on the hat and coughed. He felt that his task would not be easy. The girl looked too competent by half.

"Where's yore pa, miss?" he asked.

The lady looked up at him sweetly. She smiled charmingly and began to twiddle her thumbs.

"Isn't he in the house?" was her Yankee answer.

"No, he ain't."

"Then he must be out." She stopped revolving her thumbs, lifted one hand and inspected a slim forefinger. "I do believe I broke my nail after all," she observed, quite as if the sheriff and his men were in the next county.

"Nemmine yore nail," Jake Rule said acidly. "I wanna know where yore pa is."

The dark head lifted. She surveyed the sheriff coolly, critically, and a little wearedly.

"You'd like to know where my father is?" she drawled.

"I said so." There was a note of irritation in the sheriff's tone.

"I heard you say so," she admitted. "You shouted it from the window, didn't you?"

The sheriff swallowed hard. Shorty Rumbold smothered a smile with difficulty.

"Nice weather we're havin'," remarked Red Kane, whom the girl's sheriff-baiting was restoring to good humor. "But maybe it'll rain. What do you think, Kansas?"

His appeal to the deputy was accompanied by a portentous wink.

"Why not introduce yore friends?" continued Red Kane. "I think one of 'em's a sheriff or somethin'. They's the edge o' what looks like a star stickin' out under his vest. Why don't he wear it outside on his vest so's folks can tell he's sheriff? Y'ain't ashamed o' bein' a sheriff, are yuh, mister?"

At the direct question the man addressed frowned upon the jester. He was a consequential-looking person with a self-satisfied mouth and little piggy eyes. There was a fleshiness about his middle that agreed ill with his sheriff's star.

"I wear my star where I please," he said, in a high, thin voice. "I dunno as it's none o' yore business, is it?"

"I dunno as 'tis," replied Red, in a mocking falsetto. "I dunno as 'tis. But then I don't always mind my own business. Sometimes I'll help out other folks with theirs. I ain't proud thataway. Nobody can say I'm proud. Why, feller, I'd even help you out if I thought yuh needed it."

The reedy-voiced sheriff glowered at Red Kane.

"Huh," he grunted. "Huh."

The other two strangers paid no attention to Red. They kept their eyes, sharp eyes, too, fixed on Miss Lorimer. One of these men had a brown and jutting beard and a pony-built body. The other man was clean-shaven, with lots of teeth and a curiously twisted nose.

Sheriff Rule shifted his feet impatiently. He wanted to be getting on. Time pressed, and all that sort of thing.

And here he was being held up, both in a business way and to ridicule, by a contumacious girl.

"You'll save trouble by tellin' where yore pa is," he told her.

"Trouble?" she repeated. "What kind of trouble? And for whom? You? Or my father? Or myself?"

"All round, ma'am."

"Oh, all round. That's interestin'. That's very interestin'. Oh, yes, indeed. But I don't know that I care to save trouble. Why should I?"

Again the pretty hand concealed a yawn.

The sheriff drew a long breath. The hair at the back of his neck began to bristle. He took a step forward and pointed a lean finger at the girl.

"Don't, Red!" cautioned Kansas, for the other had unhooked a thumb.

The thumb crept back into position with reluctance.

"I'm sure the occasion does not call for violence," observed Miss Lorimer, with a sidelong glance at Red. "If the sheriff only realized how silly he looks wavin' his finger at me, why — "

She did not finish the sentence but shrugged her shoulders and twinkled her black eyes at the sheriff. He stepped back, looking foolish, and slapped his hands hard down on his hip bones.

"Look here, miss, I wanna know where yore dad is. Now you tell me, like a good girl." He licked his wheedling tongue across his lips and nodded his head to encourage her.

"'Like a good girl.' You talk as if I were three years old and played with tin dishes. You make me tired. I'll tell you what you'd better do, Mister Sheriff. You'd better hoist yourself into the saddle and travel straight back to Nottingham. Because I'll never tell you where Robin Hood is, not if you stay here till Doomsday. So now you know."

"'Robin Hood,'" repeated the sheriff, his mentality having shed the allusion as a duck sheds water. "I don't know nothin' about Robin Hood. I never said nothin' about him, did I? I wanna know where yore dad is, that's all. An' I'm gonna know."

"You won't have no better luck than the Sheriff of Nottingham," he was assured by the frankly delighted Red Kane.

"Lemme try my hand," said the stranger sheriff, sidling past Jake Rule. "I'll show yuh how to manage this fool girl."

It was unlucky for the stranger that his sidling brought him within fair arm-sweep of Red Kane. For the sentence had barely reached its period when Red, risking a shot from Kansas, added his punctuation mark.

"I'll teach yuh!" Red grated between clenched teeth, as his hard knuckles flattened the man's nose. "I'll teach yuh how to talk!"

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

AN ACCIDENT?

THE man went down beneath Red's attack with a grunt and a "Whuff!" For Red, while the other was falling, drove his fist into the unguarded stomach. Once the man was flat Red knelt upon the squirming body and whaled away two-handed.

They pried Red off at last, of course. But not before he had appreciably altered the contours of the stranger's face. Nor must it be supposed that Red was idle while they wrenched him away from his prey. He continued to work fists and feet with whole-hearted enthusiasm to the end that by the time he lay prostrate and helpless beneath the combined weight of Rule, Kansas and Shorty, every single gentleman present was aware that he had been in a fight.

Especially did the stranger friends of the stranger sheriff realize this. The one with the twisted nose sat on the ground and nursed a kneecap that had stopped Red's heel. The other was experimenting with a loosened tooth and wondering how soon his left eye would completely close.

"Uncle!" wheezed Red. "Get offa me, will yuh? I ain't no bench! Get off! I said 'Uncle!' How many times yuh want me to say it?"

"Lookit here, Red," Jake Rule said earnestly, "I don't want no more trouble with you, y'understand. You gimme yore word not to start no more fusses, an' I'll let you up. If yuh don't, I'll tie you up."

"I'll be good just so long as 'Snicklefritz' there or anybody else o' you chunkers is careful o' their language or don't try to ride me. I won't be good a second longer, an' you can gamble on that."

"I'll answer for them other fellers," said the sheriff. "They won't horn in again."

"Then I won't. Lemme get up, will yuh? How do yuh guess I'm gonna breathe with yore knee in my stummick? You'd oughta dull up that knee, Sheriff. She's too sharp. Kansas, if yo're aimin' to take out a claim on that leg o' mine, would yuh mind movin' higher up? My foot's asleep."

"Better gimme that knife an' the dime before yuh get up, Red," advised the sheriff. "Kansas, did you get his gun?"

"I'm gettin' it now," replied the deputy. "I'm takin' his derringer too."

"Hey, leave my guns be!" bawled Red. "I ain't gonna do nothin' with them guns, but I like the feel of 'em on me. Leave 'em alone, Kansas."

"Kansas will take good care o' yore guns," soothed the sheriff. "An' you'll get 'em back before we leave. But just now, Red, you ain't no man to trust with firearms. Not by a jugful, you ain't. Yuh needn't try to bite me neither. Yore teeth can't reach. About that knife an' the dime, Red — hand 'em over."

"Shore I will if yuh feel that way about it. That is, if I can pick 'em out o' myself, I will. Them things are in a front pocket, an' the longer you sit on me the harder they take root. Nemmine fishin' in my pockets, Sheriff, if it's alla same to you. I'll get 'em for yuh myself."

They let him up at that, and he handed the broken jackknife and the dime to Sheriff Rule.

"I s'pose Bill Derr told yuh I had 'em, huh?" hazarded Red, not pleased that his friend should have betrayed him.

"He didn't say nothin' about 'em," said the sheriff.

"I wanted to ask him, too, after I heard Calloway's kid gassin' about it, but Bill had went south again. Calloway's kid said yuh wouldn't say where you found 'em. Where did yuh find 'em, anyway?"

"Calloway's kid is still right," maintained Red, who, finding that he had misjudged Bill Derr, was naturally more ruffled in spirit than ever.

"Are you tryin' to run against the law?" demanded the sheriff.

"Who? Me? Me run against the law? Yo're talkin' foolish. Listen, Jake. Listen hard. I—"

"Better tell him," interrupted the low voice of Miss Lorimer. "There's no sense in being stubborn, Red. You won't gain a thing, not a thing."

"All right," Red said shortly, and told the sheriff what he wished to know.

"Between the corral an' the office, huh?" said the sheriff. "That'll be good, that will. Kansas, I wish you'd lemme see that piece o' knife-blade yuh got from Buck Saylor."

The sheriff took the piece of steel from his deputy, opened the jackknife and placed the broken parts end to end. Red crowded in closer.

"They don't fit," the sheriff said disgustedly.

But Red knew that when he made the same experiment in the Farewell express office, they fitted perfectly.

"That busted-off piece belonged to a bigger knife," averred Red, willing to go that far but no further.

"Shore," asserted the sheriff. "The busted-off piece is a eighth inch wider an' a mite thicker. An' I was lookin' for a good healthy clue out o' this! Well, maybe somethin' else'll turn up. Kansas, take care o' these here, will yuh? Better wrap 'em up in somethin'. I don't wanna run no risk o' losin' 'em, an' that dime could be special easy lost."

Jake Rule looked over his shoulder at the three stran-

gers. So, with a start, did Red. He had forgotten them for the moment. Which was unwise.

The pig-eyed sheriff, who had regained his wind, had foregathered with his two comrades at one side. They stood, a grumpy trio, and muttered among themselves. Miss Lorimer was unconcernedly darning a sock.

Sheriff Rule went close to her.

"Miss," said he, "I don't wanna have to ask you again where yore pa is."

"Very well, don't," was the tranquil reply. "You won't make me mad."

What was there to be done with such a girl? The sheriff didn't know. He tilted his hat and scratched a perplexed head.

Miss Lorimer laughed and gathered up her socks and darning-basket. She rose to her feet and walked toward the house.

"While you're wonderin' what to do next," she said to the accompaniment of a demure glance at Jake Rule, "suppose you come in the house and have some coffee and doughnuts."

"Doughnuts!" repeated the sheriff, his mouth watering. He had not tasted a doughnut in years. Mrs. Rule was not an all-round cook. "Doughnuts!" he repeated a second time. "That's shore clever of yuh. They'll go good while — while we're waitin'. Say, Red, nemmine edgin' over toward the corral. You ain't goin' ridin' now. Yo're gonna eat with us."

"I only wanted to look at my hoss," said Red, returning slowly.

"Yeah, I know. But yore hoss is all right. You c'mon in with us."

So saying, the sheriff hooked his arm through Red's and bore him within. Once indoors Red continued to augment the gayety of nations.

When the stranger sheriff pulled out a chair and sat

down at the table, Red immediately kicked back his own chair and stood up. Miss Lorimer was not in the kitchen. She and Kansas had gone out to fill the coffeepot and fetch firewood. Red would have convoyed the lady, but the sheriff had demurred. He was taking no chances with either of them.

"I'm kind o' particular what I eat with," Red said nastily. "An' I'm free to admit that I think this thing's two friends are skunks too."

"By —— !" exclaimed the first person referred to. "I ain't gonna stand this no longer."

Red leaned across the table and stuck his face within a foot of the other's swollen countenance.

"What are yuh gonna do about it?" he demanded. "I ain't got no gun, or I'd shore admire to talk to you proper. But, if you'll come outside again, I'll do the best I can with my hands an' feet. I'll take yuh two at a time if one o' yore friends wants to chip in. No, I'll do better'n that! I'll take the three o' yuh. There y'are. They's a proposition for a reasonable man. Leave yore artillery in here, an' the four of us can hop out an' settle our li'l argument in less'n no time. Whatsa matter? Whadda yuh want me to do? Tie one o' my hands behind my back or somethin'?"

The man with the jutting beard stood up and unbuckled his belt.

"I'll go yuh," he told Red. "I'll tramp on yore guts with both feet, that's what I'll do."

"Naw, yuh won't!" cried Jake Rule, springing to his feet and pounding the table with his fist. "They won't be no more fightin' round here for a while. Sheriff, you sit down. Red, you too."

"I notice," remarked Red, dragging his chair to the wall before sitting down, "I notice that stranger sheriff man didn't even start to get up till after you said they'd be no more fightin', Jake. Is he a friend o' yores?"

"Shut up, Red, will yuh? This ain't no time for jokin'."

"I ain't jokin'," denied Red. "I'm serious as lead in yore innards. I don't wonder yo're ashamed to call him yore friend. I would be, too. Do I have to stay in here, Sheriff, an' breathe the same air him an' his two friends are makin' free with? As I done told yuh, Jake, I'm kind o' particular, an' I won't never be contented in the same room with them three tinhorns. I wish you'd lemme have my gun for a couple o' minutes. I'd show yuh somethin'."

"Let him have his gun, Sheriff," urged the man with the jutting beard. "I'm kind o' curious about this jigger. He may be a ace like he says, an' then again he may be a two-spot. I'd like to find out."

"Yo're brayin' thataway 'cause yuh know he won't gimme my gun!" cried Red in a rage. "Jake," he continued, beseechingly, "I'll give you one hundred dollars for my gun."

"You can't have yore gun till I get good an' ready to give it to yuh," returned the sheriff. "I told yuh so once, an' that's enough."

The stranger sheriff flung a meaningful glance at his two friends. The one with the twisted nose promptly sat back in his chair, stretched his legs out in front of him and, his eyes on the ceiling, began to whistle. The man with the jutting beard resumed his seat, took out a penknife and began to trim his finger nails.

The stranger sheriff slumped sidewise in his chair, put up a right hand and slowly scratched his Adam's apple. Jake Rule turned to look out of the window. At which psychological moment the right hand of the stranger sheriff flipped under his vest. It flipped out again as speedily. There was a flash and a roar and a bluster of smoke and a .45 bullet splintered a round in the back of Red's chair. Red was not in the chair at the time.

He had hurled his body to the floor at the first jerk of the other man's hand.

Jake Rule whirled round to find Red Kane sitting on the floor and the stranger sheriff wearing a most bewildered expression and looking at a six-shooter that lay on the table in front of him.

"If that ain't the most careless thing I ever done," he said penitently. "Here I go to take the gun out o' my shoulder holster an' my hand slips an' the gun goes off an' damn near shoots the gent sittin' on the floor. Mister Man, I'm shore sorry. I wouldn't 'a' had no accident happen to you for anythin'."

"No," Red remarked with deep feeling, "I guess you wouldn't. I — guess — you — wouldn't. I s'pose now I was lucky to fall out o' my chair."

"Shore you was," said the other, returning the six-shooter to the holster under his armpit. "I dunno when you was ever so lucky."

"See what yore takin' away my gun almost does, Jake!" Red complained bitterly. "If you won't gimme my gun back so's I can take care o' myself, then you keep yore eyes skinned on these sharps. I don't aim to be wiped out."

"It was a accident, Red," said the sheriff, determined to put a good face on the matter.

"Oh, shore. Jake, yo're a damfool, none dammer! Stranger, whyfor did yuh pull that gun anyway?"

"I wanted to see if she was loaded," was the brazen reply.

"Yuh found out, didn't yuh? Now you listen, Sheriff No-Name. When you'n me meet again you come a-shootin', 'cause I'll be doin' the same."

"I'll try to remember," said the other gravely.

Jake Rule scratched his chin and looked doubtfully at the three strangers.

"Shorty," said he, "did you see this — accident?"

"No, Sheriff, I didn't. I was a-lookin' out the door. I heard the shot, though, an' I seen the smoke."

"Oh, yuh did," put in Red with sarcastic scorn. "Are you shore?"

"Well —" began Shorty, who was not accustomed to thinking quickly.

"It was a accident, Sheriff," the man with the jutting beard asserted smoothly. "I saw the whole thing."

"Shore," supplemented Twisty Nose. "I was lookin' right at the sheriff. Accident! I should say so! This here red-headed gent is shore a-boardin' the wrong hoss when he says different."

"Meanin' I'm a liar, huh?" rapped out Red, the allusion to his hair adding fresh fuel to the blaze of his wrath. "Aw right, what I told yore sheriff friend goes for you too."

"Why leave me out?" asked Jutting Beard.

"We aim to please, feller. Yo're welcome to help yore two friends all you like. Come a-runnin', the lot o' yuh. You —"

"What's the matter? Who's shot? Who —" Miss Lorimer, followed by Kansas Casey, darted into the kitchen and stood panting, her black eyes fixed anxiously on Red Kane.

"It's all right," replied Red easily. "Gent got a li'l careless, thassall. Nobody hurt."

"Oh," murmured Miss Lorimer. "Oh — I see. Mr. Casey, I left the coffeepot at the spring. Will you get it? I think I'm needed right here in this kitchen."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

"RIDIN' 'EM"

"WHY don't you come sit at the table with the others, Red?" asked Miss Lorimer, looking up from filling the cup of Sheriff Rule.

"I don't eat with no polecats," was the reply. "Meanin' no offense to Jake, Kansas or Shorty."

"Lord," said Miss Lorimer with a slight laugh, "if I can serve these three individuals — and I know a lot about them, too — you shouldn't object to eatin' with them."

"You know 'em!" Red looked his astonishment.

"I know 'em from way back, and they know me. You can't tell me anythin' about this bunch. Compared with them, Ananias told the truth and Judas was the soul of honor. They're so crooked they make a corkscrew look like the shortest distance between two points. Let me tell you about them."

"Ma'am," broke in Jake Rule, "it ain't necessary. I know this gentleman is Mister Tom Lumley, the Sheriff of Rock County, Colorado, an' these other gents are Mister Rouse an' Mister Bruff, his two deputies. What more —"

"There's a lot more," interrupted the lady. "You've no idea how much, really. Oh, it's no bother, Sheriff. I don't mind tellin' you. In fact, I'd rather enjoy it. What's the matter, Mr. Lumley? Isn't that chair comfortable? You're not goin' outside, are you, Billy Bruff?

You're gettin' shy all of a sudden, aren't you? Surely you can't be afraid of what a girl says, Dunc Rouse. I know you never seemed to mind when 'Sniff' O'Neill's wife used to come to your saloon and beg you not to let Sniff gamble in your place. And you used to get Sniff drunk so he would. Sniff's baby died at Christmas and Sniff's little girl went out when spring came. It must have been a hard winter in the O'Neill family. I often wonder if Sniff's wife cursed you before *she* died."

The man with the twisted nose scraped the floor with an uneasy heel and violently stirred his coffee. He licked his lips and took a long and noisy drink. He set down the cup, wiped his mouth on the back of his hand, looked everywhere save in Miss Lorimer's direction and began to build himself a cigarette.

Miss Lorimer kept her eyes upon him. She leaned against the back of a chair and nodded her head with satisfaction.

"They say a dyin' person's curse always comes true," she went on. "Is that why your hand's tremblin', Dunc?"

"Ain't tremblin'!" snapped the twisty-nose man. "What I care for you?"

"You don't have to burn your nose in order to show your indifference," she told him, for Dunc, in his confusion, had held the match where he shouldn't. "You killed Sniff, didn't you? Self-defense was the excuse you gave. Nobody saw the killin' except Tom Lumley. Self-defense! And Sniff shot plumb through the back with a shotgun! When your time comes, Dunc, the devil will certainly talk to you. Poor Sniff! I never could understand why you shot him. He was so sort of harmless and helpless I always felt sorry for him. You swore he hit you, though — or was it a kick? Oh, the nassy bad canary bird snapped at Dunc, so it did, and Dunc had to kill it, didn't he?"

Twisty Nose glowered at Miss Lorimer and muttered under his breath.

"Say it out loud," smiled Miss Lorimer. "I'd enjoy hearin' what you really think of me."

Warm-tempered Red crouched and gathered himself. Another fight was imminent. But Twisty Nose choked down the words he burningly desired to utter. His eyes glowed with sullen fire.

"Ma'am," said badgered Sheriff Rule, "I'd take it as a favor if you wouldn't talk no more."

"You'd take it as a favor, would you? *You'd* take it as a favor. I don't know that I owe you any favors. Whose house is this, anyway? Did I ask you here? I guess I can talk if I want to. I don't see anybody around here that's able to stop me."

"No, ma'am, no. Only I — You shut up now, ma'am, please."

"Why don't you gag me then, if you don't want to listen? Because I've got more to say — quite a lot more. I haven't mentioned the other two rascals yet. Of course, I know they ought to be in jail, but you don't, I imagine."

"Yo're a fine one to talk about jails," slipped in Sheriff Lumley. "You wait till we get our paws on yore pa. You won't talk so fast about jails. An' besides you can't prove nothin' against me, an' you know it. I've been elected three terms, an' I guess now that shows what kind o' standin' I got."

"It shows you bought every election," flashed the girl. "You an' your gang of thieves have run Rock County for years. Who was it stole the Gov'ment beef contracts away from the Rafter O? Who was it switched five thousand sacks of flour on the Round Mountain Indians and gave 'em middlin's? And sour middlin's at that. Who — "

"I never!" interrupted Lumley shrilly. "I didn't — "

"Who said you did?" queried Miss Lorimer.

Lumley subsided. Red Kane laughed.

"Lord, Tom Lumley," swept on Miss Lorimer. "I thought you had more sense than to be caught by a trick like that. And you call yourself a sheriff! I suppose you'll admit now you used to bootleg the Round Mountain Reservation, you and the agent, and run brace games besides for the Indians. Not content with stealin' their grub, you'd rustle their money. That's playin' both ends against the middle, I guess.

"I always believed you had a hand in killin' Sniff O'Neill, too. Dunc Rouse wouldn't have done it if you hadn't put him up to it. You held the mortgage on Sniff's little bunch of cattle, didn't you? And Sniff's wife said Sniff left home with the money to pay off the mortgage, and not two hours later he was found dead in your office? The money? What money? Mister Sheriff Lumley rolls his eyes and swears he knows nothing of any money. He had seen no money. Certainly not. The mortgage? We-ell, of course, it's too bad, tough on Mrs. O'Neill, but business is business, and Mister Sheriff Lumley took the cows. It was two days later that Mrs. O'Neill cut her throat in front of your house. When they picked her up, one of her hands was resting on your doorsill and that flat stone you used for a doorstep was dyed red.

"You took the flat stone away after that, didn't you? The red wouldn't wash out, would it? Yes, Tommy, I expect she cursed you all right. That's why she committed suicide on your doorstep. And I don't believe you'll get rid of the curse as easily as you got rid of the flat stone, either. Do you ever have nightmare, Tom?"

Sheriff Lumley's Adam's apple worked up and down a time or two. Then he laughed harshly, raggedly.

"Try again, Tom," urged Miss Lorimer. "That laugh had a crack in it."

"You can't scare me," he told her.

"I wasn't tryin' to," said she. "Look at Dunc."

The entire roomful looked at Dunc. That twisty-nosed person was noticeably pale about the lips. His eyes were glassily bright. He was constructing a cigarette and making heavy weather of it. Tobacco and torn papers littered the table in front of him. Even as the man felt the many pairs of eyes fasten upon him, his shaking fingers split in two the cigarette they held. Miss Lorimer laughed. There was no crack in her laugh. It was clear and ringing as her voice when she said:

"You should have educated Dunc to stand ridin' better than that, Tommy."

Sheriff Lumley turned hard eyes from Dunc Rouse to Sheriff Rule. He saw no help there. His gaze slid back in the direction of Miss Lorimer, passed her and came to rest on the empty coffee cup in front of him. Ostentatiously he rattled the spoon in the cup.

"Any coffee left," he grunted.

"I'm makin' some more," said the girl. "Give the water a chance to boil, can't you?"

Red Kane looked at the stove. His forehead puckered. Plainly he was searching for an elusive thought. Whatever the thought it remained elusive for the moment.

Miss Lorimer smiled and looked upon Billy Bruff with speculation in her eye. The gentleman with the jutting beard avoided her stare. It might almost be said that he dodged it. But all to no purpose.

"Have you still got that horse you stole from the Two Bars?" inquired Miss Lorimer to the accompaniment of rattling stovelids as she put in more wood.

"I dunno what yo're talkin' about," averred Billy Bruff.

"Of course you don't. How silly of me. I don't mean the horse. I mean the *horses*. Twenty-four of them, weren't there? At least the Two Bars went shy that many. You ran 'em off one moonlight night, hair-

branded 'em and sold them to Cram and Docket over in Piegan City. Wasn't that the way of it? I heard so, at least."

"You heard wrong." Mr. Bruff's tone was most emphatic.

"Funny. My hearin's fine. A Number One. I heard somethin' else too, William. They say Bruff isn't your real name at all — that it used to be Smith or Jones over west where you came from — California, wasn't it?"

"I never been west o' the Bitter Roots," said Mr. Bruff.

"No?" And oh, her voice was honey-sweet. "No? Were you ever at Fort Rackham, Idaho?"

"No!"

"You didn't have anythin' to do with the shootin' of the post trader there, did you? No, of course not. How could you if you were never in Idaho? And, if you were never in Idaho, you couldn't possibly have deserted from the Third Cavalry when it was stationed at Fort Rackham. You don't know that five troops of the Third are stationed at Fort Yardley now, do you?"

Billy Bruff's eyes flickered in spite of himself. But his voice was steady enough as he said:

"Whadda I care about the Third Cavalry or any other Cavalry? I never was in the army. I think yo're talkin' like a — " He failed to complete the sentence.

"Go on," she nodded. "'Like a what?'"

"I don't call no women names," was the reply.

Red's tense frame relaxed.

"That's right noble of you, Bill," said Miss Lorimer, with a scornful lift of her upper lip. "I didn't think you had it in you. How much were you paid to kill the post trader?"

"She's crazy," declared Billy Bruff. "Crazy as a June bug."

"Am I? We'll see. Suppose I drop a word to the commandin' officer at Yardley that Sam Reynolds, sergeant in K troop, who deserted at Fort Rackham, is a deputy sheriff in Rock County, Colorado. What then, my bouncin' boy, what then?"

"Fly at it," said Billy Bruff.

Red looked hard at the man. There was a restless, uneasy aspect about him. To be sure there was. No doubt of it. To Red's mind Billy Bruff appeared positively hang-dog. But it is to be feared that Red was somewhat prejudiced. Prejudiced or not, Red felt an overpowering urge to say what he thought.

"I'll bet you was a Long Knife all right," he observed. "An' desertin' is just what you would do, y'bet yuh."

"Yo're a liar," declared the sunny-tempered Bill. "Yo're a liar by the clock."

"Callin' me a liar once was enough. I heard yuh the first time. I'm sorry, once more, I ain't got no gun. But I'll be havin' a gun after a while, an' then maybe you'n me can argue it out. We was goin' to, anyway, wasn't we?"

"Kind o' forgot that, huh?" sneered Billy Bruff.

"No-o," drawled Red, "I didn't forget it. I got a right good memory — a right good memory. I can remember word for word just about everythin' I heard here this afternoon. An' I won't forget none of it neither. I'll stuff her down in the li'l ol' memory all same salt in a bag an' maybe some day it'll all come in useful. Yuh can't tell. Yore bein' a deserter now. That's mighty interestin'. I dunno when I heard anythin' to make me sit up an' take notice so much as that. An' yore killin' the post trader, too.

"Tell by yore face yo're some brand o' criminal. I seen a hoss-thief hung once, an' he looked like yuh. An' I seen a murderer lynched — killed a woman, he did —

an' he looked like yuh. Then they was Bert Kenny right in our own home town. He was a tinhorn — skin yuh out o' two-bits. Yeah, he was that cheap. He tried to rob Mike Flynn's store one night, an' Mike gave him both barrels of a Greener loaded with buckshot. An' he looked like yuh — before he was shot. Them buckshot sort o' mussed his features after. Don't you see the resemblance to Bert, Kansas? Some shifty li'l eyes, set close like a hawg's, same no-'count turn-up nose, same funny-lookin' frowsy set o' whiskers, same stick-out an' stick-up ears, an' same — open yore mouth, feller. I wanna see if yore teeth are like Bert's."

"For a thin dime — " began Billy Bruff.

"You'd slit my gizzard," supplied Red Kane. "I know yuh'd like to. But we was talkin' about Bert Kenny. He used to drum nervous on a table with his fingers like yo're doin' now. What yuh stop for? I don't mind. An' he used to work his jaw-muscles in an' out like yo're doin' too. An' stingy! Lordy, feller, Bert was too stingy to buy another man a drink. An' mean! Honest, I guess this Bert Kenny even hated himself. Kind o' tough he had to go an' get shot, 'cause you an' him would 'a' got along together great. Yo're so much alike."

"In a minute you'll be sayin' I was shot like this Bert Kenny," said Billy Bruff contemptuously.

"I won't be sayin' that yet," smiled Red. "But I hope to later. I shore would like to dirty up clean lead in you."

"Ain't you runnin' up quite a bill, young feller?" Sheriff Lumley cut in with a liplifting sneer.

"An' how long have you been out o' jail?" flashed the retort courteous. "An' who gave you license to horn in on my conversation? S'pose I am talkin' to a polecat, you keep still. When I get ready to talk to you, I'll let yuh know, sport, I'll let yuh know. Lordy, here comes

'Telescope' Laguerre, Loudon an' Tom. I wonder what they want?"

Whatever the three wanted they obviously wanted it in a hurry. Their right arms were quirting incessantly. Tom Kane was working his quirt cross-handed. The three horses were racing like frightened deer.

Thuddy-thud, thuddy-thud, they dusted in between the corral and the ranch-house and skittered to a halt in front of the kitchen door. Tom Kane was first through the doorway.

"He—" he began—"shucks," he finished, out of deference to Miss Lorimer, and slid his revolver back into the holster. "I didn't know it was the sheriff. When Riley told me he seen a bunch o' riders headin' this way, I just cinched a hull on the li'l hoss, picked up Telescope an' Tom Loudon down at Bill Lainey's an' come a-runnin'. I thought shore the 88 would be here," he added disappointedly, looking about him as if he half expected an 88 adherent to pop from a place of concealment.

"I'm sorry they ain't here, Tom," said Red. "But these three gents are almost as good." He indicated with a sweep of his thumb Sheriff Lumley and his two friends. "They been amusin' us a lot," he went on. "I seen a monkey eatin' peanuts once, but these jiggers are funnier than that."

"Yeah," said Tom, who, quick to take a cue, was eying with lively interest the three providers of entertainment. "Can they do tricks?"

Telescope Laguerre and Mr. Saltoun's son-in-law and foreman, Tom Loudon, nodded gravely to the men they knew and took off their hats to Miss Lorimer. Loudon winked at Red Kane. The latter stuck his tongue in his cheek and winked back.

"I dunno who you are," Sheriff Lumley said to Tom Kane, "but if you want trouble, here is where it's made."

"I've heard talk like that before — lots o' times," Tom told him. "I ain't dead yet."

"You will be if you start gettin' smoky, Tom," hastily nipped in Jake Rule. "You wasn't here when I said they ain't gonna be no fightin' round this shack to-day. You know me, an' I'm tellin' all you gents if they's any shootin' to be done I'll do it, an' I'll do it first."

"Which is good English an' can be understood by most any one," confirmed Tom. "But I wasn't thinkin' o' nothin' like that. I'm here to help out Red, thassall. What's happened to yore gun, Red?"

"Ask the sheriff." Red nodded toward Jake Rule.

"He'll get it back later," said Jake. "But he — he got gay an' I hadda take it away from him."

Involuntarily Jake's eyes wandered in the direction of Sheriff Lumley. Tom Kane's eyes followed the other's glance.

"I was wonderin' what happened to the fat feller's face," Tom observed with delight. "An' that other feller's got a right black eye. He don't look like he could see out of it none. Didn't you have no help a-tall, Red?"

"Not a smidgin'. Done it all myself. I'd 'a' done a better job, only Jake an' Kansas an' Shorty stopped me before I'd more'n begun. They're willin' — the three sharps, I mean — to shoot it out some other time."

"They're willin', huh? That's good — What? The three of 'em against you alone? Now that's what I call real generous. They's nothin' mean about them. Oh, no. But I'm in on this deal, too, an' don't yuh forget it."

"I'm goin' outside," snarled Billy Bruff. "They's too many folks in here to suit me."

"Yo're right," answered Tom Kane. "I'll go out with you."

But Sheriff Rule had something to say to that. Mem-

bers of opposing factions could not walk abroad together. Billy Bruff went out alone.

Within sixty seconds he returned on the jump.

"She's signalin'!" he bawled insanely, pointing at Miss Lorimer. "She's signalin' with smoke from that stove!"

"Did you just find it out?" queried Miss Lorimer as she sank into the chair vacated by Red. "You purblind idiot," she continued, tilting back against the wall, and hooking her heels on a rung. "I've been signalin' ever since I lit the fire. You see, the breeze dropped after you arrived. I asked you in for coffee soon's I noticed it. Dad's miles away by this time. Oh, miles and miles. Clever, wasn't I?"

She clasped her hands behind her pretty head and laughed up into the dismayed faces belonging to Law and Order.

"Done!" yelped Tom Kane and slapped his knee. "Done by a girl! Ain't you the bright lads?"

"And you never guessed why I talked so much, did you?" smiled Miss Lorimer. "I suppose you thought I was telling you about yourselves just for fun. That would have been foolish. I wouldn't waste my breath. You backed me up wonderfully with your talkin'," she appended to Red's address. "I didn't think you'd catch on."

"I didn't," he acknowledged, "till I seen yuh put on green wood an' a hunk o' sod the third time. Then I knowed. Lordy, Jake, don't look so sad. This ain't the first time you been razzledazzled, is it?"

"Nor it won't be the last," contributed Tom. "Jake, the drinks are on you."

To judge by their malevolent expressions, the drinks were likewise on the Rock County gentlemen. There was black murder in the three pairs of eyes riveted on Miss Lorimer.

Red rose and stood in front of her. Seeing which, Tom sidled up and added his lean bulk to the barrier.

"Might's well go back, I s'pose," suggested Shorty Rumbold.

"No," decided Jake Rule, "we'll wait here till to-morrow mornin'. Maybe them signals wasn't seen."

"Don't lose any sleep over those signals not bein' seen," said Miss Lorimer. "They were, never doubt it. If you want to stay, stay by all means. But would you mind sendin' Lumley and his friends outside? Now that I'm through usin' 'em, I don't want 'em in my kitchen any longer."

"Plenty o' time," said Lumley, hitching his chair close to the table. "Plenty o' time, girl. S'pose yore father has sloped; I guess now he didn't take the money with him. You can tell us where that is, an' maybe we won't arrest you."

"Maybe?" sneered Red. "Did I hear you say 'maybe'? I did hear you say 'maybe.' Tom, I don't believe he means it. I don't believe he means that 'arrest' word neither. Whadda you guess?"

"I guess yo're right," averred the pugnacious Tom.

"If I decide to arrest her as a witness, I guess it'll be all right," declared Jake Rule.

"Shore it will — if you decide to," declared Red cheerfully. "But you ain't gonna decide to. You ain't got no warrant for her, have yuh?"

"I ain't," admitted Jake. "But —"

"Then they ain't no 'buts', Jake, nary a 'but.' Nawsir. Lordy, man, you ain't gonna arrest a lady just 'cause this mangy dog of a Rock County sheriff wants yuh to, are yuh? Since when have you been niggerin' for him?"

This was the ancient game of beclouding the issue, but it worked as the old games do at times. Besides, Sheriff Rule was losing his erstwhile liking for the Rock

County officers. What Miss Lorimer had said concerning their pasts was having its effect.

"I'll bet you ain't even got a warrant for Lorimer neither," said Red, pursuing his advantage.

"Wrong there," contradicted Jake Rule. "They's a warrant for Lorimer all right, all legal an' correct."

"Lumley brought it, huh?"

"Yep."

"I dunno as you said what Lorimer's wanted for."

"Murder — murder an' robbery," Lumley answered for the other sheriff and smacked his fat lips spitefully.

"Which one o' yore friends really done it, Lumley?" Red drawled in a soft and gentle voice.

"We'll get this Lorimer gent — which his real name is Lenton —" sneered Lumley by way of reply, "an' we'll hang him good an' plenty for all yo're so smart."

"You do gimme credit for somethin', don't yuh?" cried Red happily. "I knowed you'd get onto me after a while. I just knowed it. Here's another thing before I forget it: Mr. Lorimer or Lenton never committed no murder or robbery neither. Nawsir, not he."

"If her dad ain't a murderer, whyfor did she signal him then?" demanded Jake Rule shrewdly.

Red hadn't thought of this. It was a facer, rather. Nevertheless, he opened his mouth to cry Jake down, but the girl squeezed his elbow warningly before the first word was out.

"Shut up," she whispered, and stepped past him to face Jake Rule. "I'll tell you why I signaled to my father," she went on, speaking rapidly. "I signaled him because if he's arrested he'll be hung for a crime he never committed. The money he took belonged to him. How can a man rob himself?"

"It was his brother's money!" broke in Sheriff Lumley. "An' he killed his own brother, Dick Lenton, to get it."

"That's a lie, and you know it. He only took his own share. He — we were miles away when Uncle Dick was killed."

"Maybe you can prove it," Lumley suggested waspishly.

"A fine chance we'd have of provin' anythin' down in Rock County, with you and your gang ready and able to swear black's green till all's blue. Dad hasn't a chance, and he knows it. You've had it in for him ever since he told you to your filthy, lyin' face what particular kind of hound-dog you were. You haven't nerve enough to come out in the open and fight like a two-legged he-man. No, not you; you'll sneak and slime and scheme round in the dark when folks aren't lookin' till you think everythin's safe, and then you'll drive your skinnin'-knife home right between the shoulder blades. But you've missed it this time. You'll never get my dad. You'll never take him back to Rock County to swear his life away. Mark what I say, Tom Lumley. You'll kick the wind while he's still well and hearty."

She took a step toward him, her arm outstretched, and he fell back before her pointed finger.

"I tell you," she pursued, her black eyes blazing, two bright spots of pink hot on her cheeks, "I tell you, if anybody knows who killed Uncle Dick, you know, and I wouldn't be surprised if you were the man that killed him."

"Look here — " began Tom Lumley furiously.

"Never mind. I don't want to hear another word from you. I've listened to you long enough. Get, and get quick."

"I'll go when I get good and ready," was his countercheck quarrelsome.

"Yo're ready now," Red Kane told him flatly, one long stride bringing him breast to breast with Tom Lumley. "Pick up yore feet an' stagger out through the door

where you can keep company with the other animals. Flit."

Tom Lumley tried hard to look down those inexorable gray eyes. But he wasn't man enough. Sixty seconds — his gaze shifted, veered back, wandered away again and remained away. Tom Lumley shook his shoulders and turned toward the door.

"I don't want no trouble — now," he said and went out.

CHAPTER TWENTY

LUMLEY'S LAUGH

"LORDY, Dot, you don't need to tell us nothin'," said Red.

"I want to," she declared, sitting down on the bench outside the kitchen door. "You'd much better hear it from me than from some one else."

She crossed her feet and leaned forward, her clasped hands between her knees. Her profile, dark and clean-cut, was in full silhouette against the sunset's orange-tawny.

Red Kane, sitting on the other end of the same bench, drew a long breath. It must be said that he was thinking more of her profile than of what she was saying.

"I — I — don't know where to begin," she hesitated.

"Thassall right, Dot," said Red, his eyes on that alluring profile. "Lean forward a li'l more, will yuh?"

"Wha — what?" She turned her head quickly.

"Nothin'," he told her hastily, jerking his shoulder away from his brother's pinching fingers. "I — I was afraid you was gonna fall off the bench."

"Is that why your brother's tryin' to kick you?" she asked slowly.

"No, no, that's only Tom's way. You mustn't mind him. He — he don't mean nothin'. He's always devilin' me. Some day I'm gonna make him hard to find. Yessir, I'll just naturally have to crawl his hump real savage."

"Idjit!" The epithet was uttered in a fierce whisper

as Tom jabbed Red in the ribs with stiffened thumb. "Move over."

Red obeyed. Tom dropped down beside him, and trod heavily on his instep in the process.

"You stop it." Again the whisper in Red's ear. "You gotta stop admirin' her while I'm here any — Ugh!"

For Red had kicked back. Tom at once tucked his legs out of range and surreptitiously fondled a dented shin.

"You see," said the girl, "my father's real name is Benjamin Lenton. We — my father and his brother Dick — owned the Empire mine near Flipup, Rock County, Colorado. It's not a big mine, but there's money in it for energetic men. Dad's active enough, Heaven knows, but Uncle Dick was lazier than Ludlam's dog, and he was so lazy he used to lean his head against a wall to bark.

"We worked the mine; that is, Father did, and I helped, while Uncle Dick lay down in the traces and spent most of his time in Flipup — interestin' capital, he called it. Capital! All the capital you'd find in Flipup you could stick in your eye. We didn't need money, anyway. All the Empire needed was picks and shovels and the arms to use 'em. Dunc Rouse's place was Uncle Dick's favorite hang-out. He and Dunc were about as thick as a saloon-keeper and a customer ever get to be. Billy Bruff, Sheriff Lumley and a man named Usher weren't far behind Dunc in friendliness toward Uncle Dick.

"Mind you, I'm not runnin' down Uncle Dick. I'm simply tellin' the truth about him. There was absolutely no harm in the man. He was just weak, besides bein' a natural-born fool and a gambler. Lord, cards weren't a passion with him. They were a disease.

"Dad never said much to Uncle Dick. He held it wasn't any of his business what he did. It was his own

money he was wastin', and Dad thought by-and-by he'd wade in and do his share. But I knew better. So long as he was allowed to loaf, he'd loaf. And it used to make me mad, because I was doin' Uncle Dick's work.

"I'd ask Pa to make him hold up his end of the log, but that's all the good it ever did. Dad never would be firm about it. He always was easy-goin' that way. I'm built differently, and I got good and tired of packin' ore while Uncle Dick shuffled the pasteboards with his rapscallion friends. I used to lay Uncle Dick out regularly whenever he'd come home for supper. It got so that after a while he didn't come home to supper. Then he took to stayin' out all night. I didn't mind that. It made one less to bother about.

"Maybe I wasn't wise to nag at him all the time. I don't know. I might better have kept my mouth shut. Because one day Uncle Dick came home and said he was tired of bein' yelled at by his own niece, and he wasn't goin' to stand it any longer, he wasn't, and he was goin' to sell the mine, he was.

"Father objected to that, of course. He'd no fault to find with the Empire. Uncle Dick could sell his share of the mine if he wanted to, but as for himself, he'd hang on, thank you.

"That wouldn't do at all, accordin' to Uncle Dick. The parties who wanted the mine wanted all or nothin'. 'Nothin', then is what they'll get,' said my dad. Which didn't suit Uncle Dick naturally. He wasn't real drunk at the time, I remember — about one foot in the stirrup and the other draggin' — but he'd had sufficient to make him persistent — persistent and stubborn. He was all mule that night, Uncle Dick.

"Well, he and Pa had it hot and heavy back and forth. One would and t'other wouldn't till you couldn't hear yourself think. I went out to the corral. It was too noisy for me.

"Next mornin' Dad told me he'd agreed to sell his share of the Empire. The buyers were Lumley, Dunc Rouse, Usher and Billy Bruff, and the price was sixty thousand dollars in gold. Dad was set on that point — the money in gold. And the buyers didn't object.

"They got the money from Piegan City, and the bill of sale was signed and payment made at Usher's warehouse in Flipup. This Usher is a money-lender with two saloons and a gambling house as a sideline, and he had made the necessary arrangements about the gold.

"We brought the money out to our house at the mine that evenin' — we expected to go on livin' there, Dad and I did — and Uncle Dick brought a bottle home with him. Celebratin', he called it. He celebrated all right.

"First off he began to argue about the sale. Said we should have waited awhile longer. And he was the one that started the sale talk in the very beginnin', mind you. From this he went on to say that half was too much for Dad. A third was plenty. Hadn't he — Uncle Dick — engineered the sale and done all the brain work? Dad didn't say anythin' at first — just sat there lookin' at his brother. Which didn't help to cool off Uncle Dick any. He kept right on headin' toward his finish. He finally said a fourth was plenty for anybody who'd only handled the pick and shovel end of it, and that made me wild.

"There were calluses on the palms of my hands as thick as sole leather, and I'd worn out enough pairs of overalls to stock a store. I was hoppin' mad, and I talked to Uncle Dick, and he called me names — he was pretty drunk by that time — and Dad knocked him down flat on his back. Then Uncle Dick got the shotgun out of the corner and tried to shoot Dad. And Dad took the gun away from him and knocked him down again and broke his nose and some of his front teeth.

"Even then Uncle Dick wasn't satisfied, and he picked up a butcher knife and went for Dad again. Then Dad

lost his temper, and he bent his gun over Uncle Dick's head and slammed him senseless down in under the table. When Uncle Dick came to after a while, he was pretty sick, and he looked it. He sat up, holdin' his head in his hands and groanin', and sayin' he'd been misunderstood all his life and he'd never meant any harm. And the buckshot he let fly at Dad didn't miss by more'n two inches!

"'That's all right,' Pa told him. 'You'n me are through. We split now this minute. You can have the house and one-half the money. I'll take the other half and half the horses and wagons and drag it.'

"'You can't go too quick or too fast for me,' said Uncle Dick, fetchin' another groan. 'But all the same,' said Uncle Dick, 'a third o' that money is all you rightly deserve.' Dad didn't say anythin', just kept on dividin' the gold half and half. When it was all even Steven in two piles, he told Uncle Dick to count it, and Uncle Dick did. Bein' still mellow, although a lot soberer than he was at first, it took him a long time. He got it over with at last and tucked his thirty thousand away in the oven, still grumblin' that it wasn't fair and he should have had two-thirds. Then he sat down on the floor all bloody as he was, braced his back against the oven door and went to sleep.

"We loaded our share of the household belongin's into the wagons, caught up the horses and pulled out, leavin' Uncle Dick snorin'. We followed the Seymour trail intendin' to go over to the country north of Piegan City later.

"Next evenin', not more'n half an hour after we'd thrown down for the night, Sam Wylie, one of our Flipup friends, came peltin' up and said Uncle Dick had been murdered. When the new owners of the mine rode out to take possession that mornin', Lumley wanted a drink and went to the house. There was Uncle Dick shot

to death, lyin' on the kitchen floor. There was no sign of any money anywhere, and Uncle Dick's three-diamond ring that he paid a gambler a thousand dollars for in Cheyenne was gone and Lumley and the others were talkin' of Dad as the thief and murderer. Some said they were makin' out a warrant when he left to warn us.

"Well, it did look suspicious, you can see that — our leavin' an' all. We knew that if Dad was arrested he wouldn't have any show. The sheriff, who didn't like him anyway, would be sure to make an example of him. It was too good a chance to miss — rid himself of an enemy and make a record at one fell swoop.

"We talked it over, Dad and I, and we decided our best move was to run. We didn't like the idea exactly, but it was better than havin' Dad hung; so we left the wagons standin' and rode off into the mountains. We took all the horses with us, naturally, and we certainly made a lot of trail for the next month. At the end of that time we were down in the Nation. We stayed there a couple of months, livin' under the name of Lorimer, and then moved on into Texas. We lived awhile in Goliad County and then drifted west again to Agua Seca ranch near the White Sands in New Mexico.

"We hung round there a spell and wound up the year with four months at Lincoln, where Pa bought out a little store and tried to settle down. But it was no go. He didn't like keepin' store — a miner never does, as a rule. So we pulled our freight again, this time with wagons, expectin' to nester somewhere. We finally reached this place, and — and that's all, I guess."

Miss Lenton looked down at the clasped hands between her knees. Then she raised her head and faced Red and his brother. Her face showed gray and hazy in the dusk.

"Well," she said in a low voice, "what do you think of it all?"

"I think them four gents," averred Red Kane emphat-

ically, "Lumley, Bruff, Rouse an' Usher are in this murder deal up to their belts. Thirty thousand dollars in the stove, an' Lumley was the man to find it. It was a pick-up for him, a pick-up. He couldn't 'a' ordered it better. Nawsir. No sign o' the money anywhere an' yore father blamed instanter. Shore he would be."

"You think he should have given himself up?" asked Miss Lenton.

"Lordy, no, I should say not. He done the best thing he could do under the circumstances. But them was bad circumstances, an' mighty black-lookin'. They wasn't no witnesses but you to the quarrel between yore pa an' yore uncle?"

"I was the only other person within two miles, I guess."

"Shore, an' what was yore uncle shot with?"

"Sam Wylie said with the shotgun. Father had left that as part of Uncle Dick's share, you see."

"Shot with the family shotgun, Dot, makes it worse, if anythin'. Them fellers shore are holdin' four aces an' the joker."

"I know it," the girl said. "It — it — Oh, it's awful. Nun-now we've got to go on the road again. And I did so want to settle down. It's not good for Dad to be continually on the move."

"He'll have to be unless this deal's fixed up," said Red soberly.

"If he surrenders and stands his trial he'll — "

"I know," nodded Red. "I ain't wantin' him to give himself up, not for a minute. But this traipsin' round can't go on. Some day they'll come up on him again like they done here, an' maybe the next time they'll rope him good. Ain't that the way you see it, Tom?"

"Shore," assented Tom. "They's only one thing to do — catch the real murderer."

"An' till he is caught, Dot, yore pa won't never be

safe — never. Why, for that thirty thousand dollars they'd follow him for forty years. It's more'n a safe bet they would."

"How are you goin' to fix it up, then? It's all very well to say, 'Catch the real murderer.' How are you goin' to catch him? And who's goin' to catch him?"

"Who? That's easy. I'm the answer."

"You?"

"Me."

"But —"

"But why not? I'm free, white an' twenty-one. I got all the growth I'll ever get. An' I ain't busy right now. What more do yuh want? Dot, I'm just the feller to go down there to Rock County an' reform it a few. From what you say an' from what I've seen o' the sheriff an' his outfit, I guess reformin' wouldn't hurt 'em none. Tom'll go with me. Huh, Tom?"

"Yeah," said Tom without hesitation. "You bet I'll go. You'll need somebody to bury you likely, an' it might as well be me."

"You'll never put me to bed with a shovel, old settler. Never think it. There may be buryin' done — you can't always tell what'll happen on a job like this — but the both of us'll do the diggin'. Lordy, Dot, don't look that-away. Tom didn't mean nothin', the poor fool. He's never happy without he's pullin' a long face an' grumblin' what a rough old world she is. So don't you mind him, 'cause I don't. Lookit, they must be a few straight gents in Rock County. They can't all be like Lumley's bunch. They's this Sam Wylie, f'rinstance, an' who else?"

"The two Davis boys — they run the California store in Flipup — and Bill Stringer and 'Pike County' Bowers were Dad's friends and the only ones in Flipup I'd be absolutely sure of. There are other honest men in the county itself, but they're not organized, and I don't know who they are, anyway."

"Maybe we can find out. Listen, Dot, all them things you said to these fellers — can they be proved?"

"I don't know. Every bit of what I said I'd worked out from dribs and drabs of gossip let fall by Uncle Dick when he'd come home drunk and spend the evenin' with a bottle. But there was somethin' in it all — you could tell as much by the way they acted. Bruff held the steadiest of the three, but did you notice his eyes when I said the Third Cavalry was at Fort Yardley?"

"Shore. Guess he didn't know that regiment is back east at Fort Snelling."

"Neither did I. I wish it was nearer. However, if we can't use the desertion charge, there are enough other things against him — against all three, to hang 'em twice apiece."

"But the thing is to get proof, an' proof that'll stick. Even this kind o' proof ain't always waterproof. I've seen a murderer with ten witnesses against him acquitted just too easy. These sharps would have their own witnesses too, do yuh see, an' they'd perjure themselves like li'l men. Which is the worst o' shore-'nough legal law — perjured testimony is every bit as good as honest-to-Gawd evidence."

"You know it," corroborated Tom.

"Let's go in an' get somethin' to eat," said Miss Lenton, rising to her feet and patting down and tucking in stray and sundry locks of curly hair. "It'll make all of us feel more cheerful."

But eating added little to their sadly tattered peace of mind. The aforesaid peace was completely reduced to dust by the return after moonrise of those who had departed in the early morning. They dismounted at the kitchen door. Lumley was the first to enter.

"Bring him in," said Lumley, blatant triumph in his smile. "Bring him in an' let his daughter see him."

Red Kane dropped the dishcloth and stepped nearer to

Miss Lenton. The girl carefully set down the coffeepot she was swabbing and turned toward the doorway.

In through the doorway came her father—handcuffed.

The girl, white to the lips, took one stumbling forward step and then pitched headlong in a dead faint. But Red's long arm shot beneath her as she fell. He eased her down on the floor and turned her over on her back. Kneeling on one heel, he faced his enemy across her body. Lumley, could he have but known it, was as near death as he had ever been in his precarious life.

"I guess," observed Lumley, his porcine eyes glittering with frank delight, "I guess I get the last laugh after all."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

A POINT OF LAW

LENTON, alias Lorimer, freed of the handcuffs, ate his supper with appetite. His daughter hovered about him. She said no word. By the trembling of her chin it was obvious that she was very close to tears.

"You'd never 'a' got me if my hoss hadn't 'a' fell down," remarked Lenton, stirring the sugar in his third cup of coffee.

"That was a lucky tumble for us," said Lumley.

"I was talkin' to the other sheriff," explained Lenton, switching cold eyes on Lumley.

"You'll talk to me before yo're through," grinned Lumley. "You'll stretch well, old-timer. Bein' tall, yore neck'll lengthen four inches. I've seen 'em act just like rubber."

"That'll be about all," suggested Red Kane at Sheriff Lumley's exhibition of bad taste in repartee.

"I guess yes." Jake Rule confirmed the rebuke.

"I shore oughta had better sense'n to head back for here in the mornin'," went on the unruffled Lenton. "I might 'a' knowed you wouldn't go to Farewell so soon."

"Tough luck," said Jake Rule. "Next time yuh'll know better."

"Next time!" sneered Billy Bruff. "They won't be no next time!"

"After my readin' the signals so plain an' all," Lenton said, paying no attention to Bruff, "to be glommed onto thisaway is shore discouragin'."

"Ain't it," assented Jake Rule. "Nemmine gettin' up, Lenton. Here's the makin's, if that's what yuh want."

"If that's the way yuh feel about it, 'no movin'' goes. Yo're jomightyful cautious, ain't yuh? You must think I'm gonna try to escape or somethin'."

"I ain't trustin' you a foot," Jake told him. "I'm free to admit I'll be glad when yo're off my hands tomorrow."

"You ain't sendin' him back to Rock County to-morrow, are yuh?" demanded Red Kane.

"An' why not?" cut in Lumley hotly. "Why not, I'd like to know?"

Red Kane was at a loss for an answer. Then suddenly the fragmentary recollection of a long-forgotten lawsuit stuck its head above the surface in the backwaters of his mind.

"Yuh said they's a warrant out for Ben Lenton, didn't yuh?" Red asked of Jake Rule.

"Shore," replied the Fort Creek sheriff.

"Lemme see it," said Red.

"He's got it." Jake nodded toward Lumley.

"Lemme see it," Red repeated to Lumley.

Lumley hesitated. He wanted to refuse, if only to gratify petty spite.

"Lemme see it." Red stretched forth an arm. "This warrant may not be legal."

At which Lumley produced the warrant from an inner pocket of his vest and slapped it down on Red's open palm.

"Read her off," invited Lumley, "an' see if she ain't legal to the finish."

Red opened the document and spread it flat on the table. So far as he could discover, the warrant was water-tight.

"Lessee yore extradition papers," Red said to Lumley.

Lumley did not hesitate now. He handed the papers

to Red at once. At first glance the extradition papers looked to be as proof as the warrant.

"See," pointed out Lumley — "signed by both Governors. What more djuh want?"

Lumley would have been better advised to keep silent. Under the spur of his speech Red remembered another detail in that long-forgotten case.

"When did yuh arrest Ben Lenton?" Red inquired of Jake Rule.

"This mornin'."

"Then when these extradition papers were made out he hadn't been arrested."

"That's got nothin' to do with it!" bawled Lumley. "Them papers is all right!"

"When you went to the Governor of Colorado for these extradition papers," Red drawled serenely, "you hadda say the gent you wanted 'em for had been arrested, didn't yuh?"

Lumley made no reply. He looked uncertainly at Billy Bruff.

"Didn't yuh?" persisted Red Kane.

"Yes, I did!" Lumley cried defiantly. "What of it?"

"Only this, feller, only this. Just a li'l point you overlooked. When you went to yore Governor an' told him Ben Lenton was arrested, you lied, see, 'cause Ben was strollin' free an' careless wherever he liked at the time. Unless a man is already arrested, yuh can't take out extradition papers for him. That's the law, an' for once the law is common-sensical. Any fool oughta know yuh can't extradite a gent who don't exist — yessir, exist. I heard Judge Allison down in Marysville use that very word — an' Lenton didn't begin to exist as a criminal under the law till he was arrested."

"But he's arrested now," exclaimed Lumley, "an' I guess you can't deny that!"

"I ain't denyin' it. I'm sayin' these papers is no good,

an' you gotta get new ones before you can take Lenton out o' Fort Creek County. I ain't even shore that Jake Rule can hold him."

"I'll hold him all right," Jake assured Red. "Don't bet money against that. I can hold him on suspicion, anyway. Shucks, Lumley, why was you in such a hurry? Why didn't yuh wait to get yore papers till after Lenton was arrested?"

"You mean to say yuh won't honor them papers?" gasped Lumley.

"Yep." Jake nodded an emphatic head. "I dunno why I never thought of it before, but it's just like Red says: them papers wasn't no good when they was made out. This bein' so don't make me none too shore they're any good now. The best thing you can do is flit back to Colorado an' get new ones. . . . Huh? You know as well as I do, yore Colorado warrant don't travel a foot in this Territory — not a foot."

"I don't give a —— whether them extradition papers wasn't no good then," bellowed Lumley, manifestly determined to override all opposition; "they're good now. He's been identified by us, ain't he? He's been arrested by you, ain't he? All right, then. Here's the extradition papers. They're drawed up legal. I call on you to obey 'em an' gimme this prisoner."

"They ain't legal!" gainsaid Red quite as vehemently. "You wanna go slow, Jake. You better — "

"I don't need nobody to tell me how to run my office, Red," interrupted the harassed Fort Creek sheriff. "They's somethin' funny about this business," he continued, turning on the Rock County man. "When you took these papers to our Governor to sign you told him Lenton was in custody, like you told yore own Governor, or you'd never 'a' got him to sign 'em. I dunno nothin' about the Governor of Colorado, but I know the Governor of this Territory, an' he's a lawyer, an' he'd never allow

no such monkeyin' with the law as this. Which I should say not in a million years. Shut up, Lumley! I'm a-doin' this talkin'. I tell yuh flat, I think yo're runnin' a brace game, but I'm willin' to be fair. We'll get legal advice on this."

"Legal advice!" yelped Lumley. "Where in Gawd's name yuh gonna get legal advice this side o' Piegan City? I can't wait for —"

"Yuh can go home whenever yo're ready. They ain't no ropes on you. But my prisoner don't go till I get that legal advice, an' I don't have to send to Piegan City for it neither. Our Governor's takin' a vacation up at Cutter. He told me he was gonna make it two weeks when he stopped off at Farewell, an' the two weeks ain't up yet. So I'll ride up to Cutter an' find out what's what. You can come along if yuh wanna."

"I don't wanna. Not for a minute. I'm gonna stay by the prisoner."

"I'll leave Kansas Casey on guard at the jail, so —"

"Then I'll help Kansas Casey," declared Sheriff Lumley. "All three of us'll help Kansas Casey. I ain't takin' no chances, Mister Sheriff, not a single chance."

"All right. Through, Lenton? Le's be movin' then. That's enough, Lumley. You've asked him about the money forty times. Let it go at that."

Red Kane, crossing the room, passed in front of Telescope Laguerre. The half-breed, who had started to rise as Jake Rule spoke, resumed his seat.

"Ain't yuh comin', Telescope?" queried Tom Loudon from the doorway.

"My pony she tire," said the half-breed, the teeth flashing white beneath his stubby black mustache. "I t'ink I weel stay here aw'ile mebbeso."

When the posse rode away into the moonlit night, Dot Lenton slumped down on the doorsill and began to cry.

"Thassall right," said Red soothingly, awkwardly pat-

ting her shoulder. "Thassall right now. Don't you fret. Don't you fret a single mite. Yore pa ain't gonna stay in that jail long."

"Wha — what do you mean?"

The light from the kitchen slanted across the tear-stained face when she raised her head.

"I mean we're gonna get him out."

"You're goin' to get him out!"

"Yep, y' bet yuh." With the utmost confidence.

"How?"

She lifted a hand and laid it tremblingly on his knee.

Telescope Laguerre tactfully looked out of the window. He was beginning to understand. Tom Kane understood but too well, and he did not look out of the window. He stared gloomily across the glowing end of his cigarette at the small hand outlined against the leather of Red's chaps.

"Le's go out to the spring," suggested Red. "I'm kind o' thirsty. Ain't you?"

Apparently the girl was, for she allowed him to help her to her feet. The two drifted away under the moon toward the spot where the cottonwoods' shadows splashed the grass with velvet black.

"In a minute he'll come back with a fine scheme to get us both hung," grumbled Tom Kane.

"How?" inquired Telescope.

"I dunno how, but I know him. You heard what he said about gettin' Lenton out o' jail, didn't yuh? Aw right, he meant it. But he's got his nerve pullin' you in, Telescope. They wasn't no call for that. I saw him pinch yore knee, an' I tried to catch his eye, but he wouldn't look."

"Dat ees all right," smiled the half-breed. "Eef Red she wan' for me to help heem, by gar I weel help heem, me. W'at you t'ink about dat man Lenton, Tom?"

"We-ell, I'll tell yuh, Telescope. The evidence is all against Lenton, but I'm believin' that girl. Hell's bells,

when she says a thing, yuh gotta believe it. Yuh can't help yoreself. An' she say he didn't commit no murder nor robbery neither."

"Den Lenton she didn'," Telescope declared with finality. "Dat girl she have de hones' face, un dem tree men from Coloraydo dey have not de hones' face. I tell you, Tom, eef I was for have much beezness wit' dem tree men, I t'ink I would wear my seex-shootair inside de waist-ban' o' my pant', by gar. I do not trus' dem not so far as I can see de skeetair een de moonlight. Gimme de match."

When Red and Miss Lenton reached the spring, the blazoned purpose of their coming fled their minds. Miss Lenton turned to Red and took hold of the lapels of his vest.

"How will you get him out?" she demanded.

He found it difficult to pattern his thoughts — to speak coherently. She was so near. Her face was within six inches of his face. The sweet scent of her hair was in his nostrils. She leaned against him ever so little. The soft darkness enveloped them.

Red, feeling strangely dizzy, a throbbing roar as of many distant waterfalls in his ears, stared over the girl's head at the corral and the ranch-house where they glimmered greeny-gray in the moonshine. In the lower half of the kitchen window as in a picture frame, the motionless head and shoulders of Telescope Laguerre bulked against the lamplight.

"Lordy," whispered Red Kane, breathing deeply, "we ain't gonna get nowhere thisaway. Here — here's a rock, Dot. You sit on it."

She loosed her hold on his lapels and obeyed him as obediently as a little girl. He sat down cross-legged in front of her and pushed his hat back from his damp forehead.

"I got a idea," he said, his eyes on the cloudy gray oval

that was her face. "It ain't all clear yet in my mind. Part I'll have to work out as I go along. Yuh gotta in a case like this, 'cause yuh never know what the other feller's gonna do.

"Yore dad'll be in the Farewell calaboose till day after to-morrow. Jake won't get back from Cutter before late to-morrow night, an' maybe he won't then. The Governor may not be in Cutter. He may be off fishin' or out at Lane's Ranch over north o' Cutter about ten miles. Tump Lane's a friend o' the Governor's, an' it ain't likely he'd come alla way up here an' not visit Tump. So yuh see, if Jake has to scout round after the Governor, it'll take time, an' maybe it'll be a couple o' days before Jake gets back with what he went for.

"But I ain't figurin' to need two days. To-morrow night, if I ain't out o' luck complete, we'll turn the trick. It's thisaway, Dot: Tom an' me'n Telescope, we'll —"

And he went on to tell with as much detail as possible his plan for the release of Mr. Lenton.

The girl listened in silence. When he had finished, she breathed a long, quivering sigh.

"I think it'll work," she said. "But there'll be danger; so I'm goin' with you."

Red chuckled in tender scorn of her.

"That'd be real sensible, wouldn't it?" he smiled. "Yo're chimin' in would make it twice as dangerous. Not that they's any real danger, of course," he hastened to add. "Only a li'l risk, an' they's that every time yuh saddle a hoss. Don't you worry, Dot, everythin's gonna go off like a clock wound up. We —"

"I'm goin' with you," she interrupted.

"Not if I gotta tie yuh down you ain't," he told her flatly.

"I can't let you take every chance alone," she persisted stubbornly. "I'm goin', I tell you, and that's all there is to it."

"Don't you see that yo're needed right here?" he asked patiently. "The first place they'll search is this ranch-house, an' they'll bust out here on the jump, lemme tell yuh. An' you gotta be here when they come all ready to play the innocent. An' yuh gotta play the innocent strong — so strong they'll think yuh dunno nothin' about the jail-break. 'Cause, yuh see, if yuh dunno nothin' about it, the first thing yore dad would do would be to come see yuh or write to yuh or let yuh know somehow; so they'll watch the ranch mighty close, an' they won't scout round so energetic after yore father.

"Tom Lumley an' his two burlies won't, special. They'll take root near where they think the money is likely. An' I want 'em to do that, y'bet yuh. The longer they stay away from Rock County an' Flipup, the better I'll be pleased. They're slick. I give 'em credit for that. They showed it by not swearin' out a warrant for you along with yore pa. They don't want you on no witness stand yet awhile. You got plenty o' cartridges?"

"Plenty. Why?"

"Yo're gonna be here alone, an' — "

"Silly!" she interrupted. "Who'd hurt me?"

"For thirty thousand dollars some jiggers would — Well, Dot, you gotta risk it at first till Jake an' Kansas have been out here an' searched an' asked questions. After that you spend all the time you can in Farewell. Stay with Joy Blythe, Mike Flynn's partner, or Mis' Jackson. They'll be tickled to death to have you. I'll tell Telescope to pass the word to Jake an' Kansas to lookout yore game all they can. They bein' after yore pa won't make no differ. They ain't gonna see no woman hurt. Will yuh do as I say now? . . . Well, that ain't much of a promise, but I s'pose I'll have to be satisfied. Yo're the doctor. . . . Huh? No, Dot, I don't wanna hear! I don't wanna know where the money's hid. I

might talk in my sleep or get delirious or somethin' an' let it out. You keep it to yoreself. Shore, I know yuh trust me, but I'd a heap rather yuh didn't tell me."

Her body swayed toward him.

"You're good," she whispered. "You're just good. I — I — Red, if you get my father out of this, I'll marry you."

"Will yuh?" said he calmly, not altering his position in the slightest. "Would that be the only reason?"

"I'll risk the — the other," she affirmed unsteadily.

"Not with me." Emphatically. "Look here, girl," he continued in lower but no whit less earnest tones, "this love part o' marriage is the greatest thing in the world. It's the only reason they is for marriage. The only thing that makes bein' married worth while is love. It's like the saddle on the hoss, Dot. The hoss can be rode bareback, but even if he don't pile yuh, yo're shore to be a heap weary an' wanna get off an' walk before long. I don't — I wouldn't have yuh marry me till yuh say yuh love me. Yuh can't say that now, can yuh?"

"I don't know. I'm not sure. I — "

"There now. If yuh loved me, yuh'd say so right out."

"But I tried to, Red. I did, honestly. An' I can't. It — it wouldn't be true."

"Shore, thassall right. It will be true some day. You got to love me. No two ways about that. Yuh just got to. An' yo're gonna. I can wait. Yo're a heap worth waitin' for."

"But — but suppose I never am able to say it truthfully?"

At this he swept an arm across and downward as one who brushes away the trifling fly.

"I'm tellin' you over an' over again," he affirmed with the utmost earnestness, "that yo're gonna. G-O-N-E — gone, T-O — to — gonna. Why, listen, girl, I never was

religious much. They's more dance-halls than churches out here, anyway, an' besides I never thought about such things, bein' busy myself most always, but if they ain't a heaven, then why was I allowed to find you like I did? Shore, Heaven wouldn't never 'a' lemme fall in love with you so hard if you wasn't meant to love me back sometime. Now, don't say nothin'. Just you set right still an' think it over. I gotta go in the house an' fix things up with Tom an' Telescope."

When Red entered the ranch-house, the half-breed looked at him woodenly. Tom, apparently plunged in the dark depths of gloom, stared sulkily at his own toes.

Red sat down on the table edge and smiled cheerily.

"We gotta get Ben Lenton out o' jail," said he. "I got it planned to a fareyouwell. All we gotta do —"

"What'd I tell yuh, Telescope?" interrupted Tom. "Here's where we all git ten years apiece at Piegan City, if we ain't buried first, which is also plumb likely. G'on, Red. Don't lemme choke yuh off."

"You ain't," Red said calmly, unhurriedly building a cigarette. "I've changed my mind. I'll tell yuh my scheme while we're ridin' to the Bar S. We'll save time thataway."

"Whadda yuh wanna go to the Bar S for?" demanded the irritable Tom. "I thought you was through there once."

"I am, but I want my time. I got seventy round hard simoleums a-comin' to me, an' they'll be right handy for a young gent my size. What say we start in about ten minutes? I gotta pack in some water from the spring first. Nemmine about helping me. Thank yuh most to death. I'm plenty able to lift two pails without strainin' any muscles."

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

THE BAR S

"An' if any sport present has a better idea," said Red as the horses single-footed through the moonshot night, "le's hear it."

"Swelled head, ain't he?" grunted Tom to Telescope. "My own brother, an' all swelled up like a poisoned pup. You don't mean to say yuh thought that all up without any help, Red — yore own self, out o' yore own head?"

"I mean to say lots of things," said Red, "but if I was to tell yuh only a quarter of 'em, yuh'd get insulted an' drill me. Which will be about all from you."

"Oh, will it, you red-headed chipmunk? You shore got all kinds o' gall, you have. My barn! You act like barns didn't cost nothin'. Aw, I know you'll pay me some day. You bet you will, old settler. But alla same, if you'd prance out an' do all yore li'l funny businesses private so's if anybody's wiped out it'll be only yoreself, I'd be tickled to death. But not you. Oh, no, not by a mile an' a half. You gotta rope in Telescope, just as if he was interested. Lookit here, Red, ain't I enough?"

"I ain't heard Telescope kickin' none," countered Red.

"You won' neither," declared the halfbreed. "Dees weel be *amusant, bien sur.* I do not like dat Meestair Lumley. She have de beeg mouth."

"They know Telescope stayed at Lorimer's — Lenton's I mean, after they left," said Tom dubiously, rubbing his chin with the back of his hand. "Maybe now they'd be

suspicious of him. Maybe now they wouldn't ask him to do no trailin'."

"Trust Telescope." Red nodded a confident head. "They know he's the best trailer in the territory. Shore they'll ask him."

"You bet you," affirmed the half-breed. "I have been de scout; I have leeve wit' Enjun. I weel mak dem sheriff' see wat I wan' dem to see un t'ink wat I wan' dem to t'ink. I weel walk een de watair-r-r plenty," he added emphatically, and his black eyes rolled in company with his "r's."

"See, Tom," Red pointed out kindly, "yo're a fool like always. But don't get down-hearted. Maybe yuh'll outgrow it."

Mere words could not possibly do justice to Tom's feelings, but he did his best.

Two hours later, when the ground began to lift to the eastern shoulder of Indian Ridge, they split one and two, Telescope riding away toward Farewell, the brothers heading southward into the Big Bend of the Lazy River, where lay the Bar S ranch.

"An' I gotta leave my business," complained Tom, once Telescope was beyond hearing, "an' help you get a girl I don't want yuh to get."

"You ain't helpin' me get no girl," tossed back Red. "Not for a minute you ain't. Yo're only gonna help me get her pa out o' jail. Thassall, Tom. Just a li'l jail-bustin'."

"Same thing, feller, same thing. Don't yuh guess I know how yuh'll stand with that girl when we turn her pa loose? I ain't no plumb idjit, if I am yore brother. Why, she'll fall on yore neck like she's never gonna leggo. An' then yuh'll marry her."

"That'll be great," declared Red, and the happiness in his voice was tremendous.

"Good-by," snarled the goaded Tom, "you've gone

under for the third time. I knowed it. You always was the unlucky one of us two."

"Unlucky?"

"Shore unlucky, but they's no tellin' how much till after yuh been married long enough to get over the honeymoon feelin'. Unlucky! Which I should remark! You'll look at me caperin' round foot-free an' fancy-loose, an' you'll say, 'Lordy, I used to be like that once,' an' me, I'll lay back an' laugh at yuh. Don't yuh never tell me I didn't warn yuh. I got a sore throat doin' it."

At midnight they made a dry camp beside the trail and slept four hours. They were trotting on at a few minutes past four.

The Bar S outfit were noisily sitting down to breakfast in the log dining room adjoining the cook-shack when Red and his brother walked in.

"Here's the trouble-makers," bawled Buff Warren. "Licked the rest o' the 88 yet, Tom?"

"Not yet," grinned Tom. "I done left a few for you fellers."

"We don't never get a chance at 'em," mourned the vainglorious "Kid." "You bet they keep out of our way."

"Hear who's talkin'!" cried Dave Cantrell. "Ever since the Kid's voice changed for good he acts just like a grown-up. Wears a gun an' everythin'."

"I see I gotta come back," said Red, swinging a leg over the bench at Dave's side. "The Kid shore needs a chaperon. An' I was the only one that ever could manage him. Has Jimmie had to spank him lately?"

Here the maligned and affronted Kid flung a hunk of bread. Red ducked and countered with a Dill pickle, long and luscious, that struck the Kid on the left eye and spattered his face most nobly.

"Ow!" yelled the Kid, and, clapping his sleeve to the smarting organ, he rushed outdoors in quest of cooling waters.

"Things ain't changed a bit," observed Red as, keeping both hands busy the while, he looked about him with innocent eyes.

"Neither have you, yuh walrus!" shrilled the Kid's Twin from across the table. "Dave, that road agent has glommed yore plate an' knife an' fork!"

"Thassall right," Red said easily, halting a forkful of fried ham and eggs half-way to his mouth. "Dave hadn't used 'em yet."

The fork completed its journey. Red worked his jaws squirrel-wise with great rapidity and winked at the outraged Dave, who was guarding his coffee-cup with one hand and reaching for a clean plate with the other.

Chug! Something soft and squashy struck Red in the back of the neck as he was in the act of stuffing more ham between his jaws. Said jaws came together with a snap, and tears stood in Red's eyes.

"I guess we're even now," chirped the Kid, skipping round the table and hopping nimbly into his seat. "That potato wasn't as soft as I'd 'a' liked, but it was the best I could find. What's the matter, Reddy? Didn't bite yore cheek, did yuh?"

"No-o," drawled Red, making manful effort to speak distinctly, for he had indeed severely bitten his cheek. "No-o, I was just a-studyin' whether I'd feed here with the animals or go out to the corral an' eat with the folks."

"You better stay here," suggested Bill Holliday. "You'll feel more at home."

"I might feel plumb at home," said Red, "if Tim Page would stop lookin' at me. He ain't took his eyes off me since I come in."

"You bet I ain't," averred Tim. "I been admirin' yore leather cuffs, Red — yore nice new leather cuffs. They look a lot like the cuffs I asked Old Salt to get for me an' he told you to get instead."

"Shore they're the same cuffs, Tim," Red affirmed heartily. "I like 'em so well I'm gonna keep 'em myself. I know you won't mind."

"Me mind! Oh, no! Which I got a nature like a suckin' calf, I'm that gentle. An' my green handkerchief! What yuh done with that?"

"I got that too," Red admitted in a sorrowful tone.

"I know yuh have, you skinny scoundrel! I had my mouth all set an' waterin' for a green handkerchief, an', when I heard about you gettin' all gormed up in yore battle with the 88, I pranced down to Farewell to get my own stuff. An' it ain't to be got. They ain't a green handkerchief within four hundred miles, an' the cuffs was all sold out, too. An' you got the nerve to come back here an' look me in the eye after glommin' my clo'es. Look at him, gents. He thinks it's a joke."

"Well, an' ain't it?" defended Red warmly. "The drinks are all on Tim. I'll leave it to anybody. Besides, leather cuffs an' green handkerchiefs are vain. Next Tim will wanna be wearin' them ruffle-cum-tuffle jiggers on his shirts an' tyin' pink ribbons round his li'l ears all same female woman. Didn't you get a letter from me, Tim, with yore money in it?"

"No, I didn't, but —"

"Then that's all right, 'cause I didn't send no letter. So I'll give yuh yore coin when I get through eatin'. When's the coffee comin', anyway?"

It came at that instant in a large pot borne by Jimmie the cook.

"Yuh might know Red was back," grinned Jimmie. "Soon as I seen the Kid run out holdin' his eye an' rarin' an' swearin', I knowed our Reddy had come home. An' how is the li'l feller? An' has he been a good boy while he was away from papa? Look out, you fool! Leggo my leg! Djuh wanna spill the coffee? You won't never stop bein' a idjit, Red, will yuh? Serve yuh right

if I'd poured the coffee down yore neck and burnt yuh good. Look how nice brother's behavin'. He's got manners, he has."

"An' why wouldn't he? He never lived with you fellers like I have. Hell's bells, it's a wonder to me I'm still a human bein'. Good thing I ain't here no more. Gimme another year o' the Bar S, an' I'd be gettin' weak-minded like you, Jimmy, or always on the prod like Tim Page over nothin'. Lordy, it shore makes me shiver when I think what a narrow escape I had. Is that a piece o' ham yonder? It looks like ham. It cuts like ham. An' it tastes like ham. What could be fairer than that?"

"Give him the plate, Dave," said Jimmy resignedly, "so's he can scrape it. They's a li'l piece o' lean in one corner an' a small piece o' fat in another, an' I'd hate for him to miss 'em. He might think he hadn't had a good time if he hadn't ate everythin' in sight."

"He eats like that Hollister gent," said Sam.

"He eats faster," modified Hockling critically, "but Hollister opened his mouth wider. Hold more, too, Hollister could."

"Hollister," repeated Red when he had gulped a mouthful. "Was he a skinny gent, 'Hock,' with wide shoulders an' small feet? Don't smile much."

"He didn't smile none while he was here," said Hockling. "He stayed all night."

"When was he here?"

"Last Monday."

"D'he say where he was goin'?"

"He didn't say, but he rode away south. Why? Is he wanted?"

"Not that I know of. Only he seems to 'a' got the habit of eatin' where I do, an' I was wonderin'. He's a association detective likely. They're always roamin' round."

"But they ain't no rustlin' goin' on here," objected the Kid. "Maybe he's one o' them road agents."

"Every time the Kid sees a stranger," jeered Dave Cantrell, "he thinks he sees a road agent an' goes to loosenin' his six-shooter."

"He's been tryin' to organize a Vigilance Committee for a month," supplemented Buff Warren. "But so far him an' the Twin are the only members. They're shore bloodthirsty, both of 'em."

"Maybe they're right, at that," said Red judicially. "I've done read some'ers where children are supposed to have more sense than regular folks."

"Is that so?" both children cried in unison. "Is that so? You wait. You old gran'pops think yo're so smart. You just wait. We'll have us a road agent, maybe a couple, while yo're twiddlin' yore fat thumbs."

After breakfast Red went to the bunkhouse and packed his few belongings in his saddle pockets and *cantinas*. Carrying his warbags, he went to the office for his pay.

Mr. Saltoun was sitting at the desk. Tom Loudon was sitting upon it. There was no rancor in the latter's greeting, but the former eyed Red grumpily.

"Yo're a dandy," said Mr. Saltoun. "I told you to let that 88 bunch alone, an' now we got all the makin's of a fine an' healthy cattle war on our hands."

"You let my brother Tom alone," grinned Red, "an' he'll kill 'em all off for yuh. I'll be glad to help myself, if that'll do yuh any good."

"Helpin' yoreself always was yore strong play, in the grub line anyway," grunted Mr. Saltoun, purposely mistaking Red's meaning. "I s'pose yuh want yore time."

"Me? No-o, not for a minute. What do I care for money? Bag o' shells, thassall it is, like I heard a actress lady say once."

"I'm laughin'," Mr. Saltoun said with deep sarcasm. "I'm laughin' fit to split. Tom, will yuh draw this gent's

check before I choke? My Lord, Red, the trouble you unthinkin' punchers fall into is amazin'. How a man can make money out o' cows, I don't see. Drought, the itch an' blizzards, an', if it ain't them, it's a cattle war. An' everythin' dear as the devil. Red, that infernal Piney Jackson sent in a bill for that buckboard as long as my arm."

"Piney Jackson, o' course!" exclaimed Red. "Now why didn't I think o' that before?"

"I wish you had, then maybe you'd 'a' tied that buckboard some'ers else instead o' right in front o' that stampedin' stage."

"I don't mean that. But Piney — Now, you an' him was in the army together, wasn't you?"

"We went through the Sioux Campaign o' '68 — '69 together. I was scout for Forsyth, an' he was a blacksmith."

"Was yuh ever at Fort Rackham, Idaho?"

"I wasn't. But Piney was there in the fall of '70 six months before his time was out. He like to froze more'n once. To hear him tell it yuh'd think that winter was hard just on his account."

"Was the Third Cavalry at Rackham then?"

"Shore. Piney was transferred to the Third. Didn't I say so?"

"Not till now. It don't matter. Piney Jackson! O' course, I'd 'a' thought of him later, but it might 'a' been too late then. Good thing I dropped in to-day. I was born lucky, I guess."

"You was born crazy, more like," Mr. Saltoun declared with conviction. "What's all this about Piney Jackson? What yuh talkin' about, anyway? You ain't drunk. It's too early in the mornin' for that. Whatsa matter with yuh, Red, huh?"

"Nemmine whatsa matter with me," grinned Red. "It's a secret. I got troubles of my own, I have, an'

they're botherin' me plenty like rheumatics in gran'pop's left leg. Sometimes I just dunno what I'm gonna do. Nawsir, I don't. Blot that check plumb good after she's signed, will yuh, Salt? Yo're writin's so bad they's no sense in makin' it worse."

Red and Tom were miles on their way to Farewell when Mr. Saltoun made the unwelcome discovery that Telescope Laguerre had not returned.

"He stayed at that nester's place when the rest o' yuh left, didn't he?" he said to his son-in-law. "An' that no-account good-for-nothin'-a-tall Red Kane was there too, wasn't he? Well, then he's gone an' got Telescope into some devilment, that's what. Aw, you can't tell me nothin' about Red Kane. When you first told me about Telescope's stayin' behind, Tom, I had a slinkin' idea they was a badger in the hole some'ers, an' now I know it. Can't you do nothin' besides laugh, Tom? Telescope's the best man in the outfit since Red's gone, —— —— the —— —— —— luck!"

At nightfall Red and Tom were sitting amid boulders at the mouth of a small draw north of Indian Ridge. From where they sat they could see the lights of Farewell a-glint across the wide flat.

"Telescope oughta be here soon," muttered Red.

Tom nodded. It was too hot to talk. There was no breeze stirring. The sun had gone down a flaming red disk. The indications were all for a burning hot day on the morrow.

Red ran a slow finger round the inside of the loosened collar of his shirt and pulled the damp flannel away from his perspiring skin. He took off his neck-handkerchief and fanned his hot face with it. The said neck-handkerchief was a cheap and utterly chaste blue bandana which had taken the place of the green silk sequestered by Miss Lenton.

Red did not like the blue bandana. It may be said that

he loathed it with a great loathing. For he was a finicky individual in some respects, and cotton cloth was not his idea of a fitting neck covering. Green silk now — But there was to be no more green silk ever again. Red reknotted the bandana and settled his shoulders against a boulder. He straightened quickly, for the rock still retained much of the sun's heat.

"Burn yoreself?" chuckled Tom, who had done that very thing in the same manner a moment before.

"Burn myself?" queried Red. "Now why should I burn myself on this nice cool rock. Yo're talkin' foolish, man."

Tom made no retort. Instead he inclined his head as one who listens to sounds afar off.

"Telescope comin'," said Tom.

"Then Telescope's ridin' more'n one hoss," amplified Red, listening in his turn. "Le's get back a ways. They's some tamaracks behind these boulders."

Leading their horses, they withdrew to the shelter of the tamaracks. Here, among the sticky tree trunks, they waited and watched. Their fingers gripped the noses of their horses. For, be it known, the horse is a friendly animal and will call to his kind upon all occasions.

"Don't sound like they're comin' from Farewell," hazarded Tom.

"They ain't," declared Red. "More out o' the northwest."

"They're headin' to pass right near them boulders where we was a-settin'. Whadda you guess?"

"Yeah — four of 'em."

The approaching horsemen were riding at a slow trot. The moon was still three hours under the horizon, but the starlight was bright enough to reveal the dim shapes of four riders as they passed in single file the boulder-strewn mouth of the draw.

The leading horse stumbled as a stone rolled under an

incautiously placed forefoot. His rider jerked him up and called him names. His tone was not excessively loud. But Red and his brother heard him distinctly. They were not twenty yards distant.

The four shadowy horsemen, holding religiously to their unhurried gait, disappeared in the darkness. The patter of the hoofbeats dwindled and died away to the southeast.

"Sounded like Hollister's voice, kind of," said Tom, dropping his restraining hand from the nose of his horse.

"Kind of! It was Hollister. I've heard him talk three-four times. He seems to have found friends. I wonder what his business is, anyway?"

"Yo're gettin' as suspicious as the Kid an' the Kid's Twin. Ain't we packin' enough trouble without worryin' about Hollister? He ain't done nothin' to us. Leave him be. We got a man's-size job to fuss with, feller; so le's wrastle it."

"But he headed south from the Bar S, an' now here he is away north of the Bar S an' headin' southeast."

"She's a free country. It's nothin' against a man if he rides the range, I guess. He may have regular business. Yuh dunno."

"He may have, an' then again he may not. All right, all right, have it yore own way, Tom. Hollister's a tin he-saint with li'l gold eye-winkers if you say so. Anythin' for peace an' quiet. She's too hot to argue."

"Then don't argue."

"I ain't. Ain't I said I ain't? Hell's bells, three of 'em in a row! I said I'd try an' do better, an' I clean forgot. Hell's bells, I dunno — Lordy, it's harder'n I thought."

Red rubbed a worried forehead and kicked a tree trunk.

"'Three of 'em in a row,'" repeated the mystified Tom. "What yuh talkin' about? What yuh gonna try an' do better? What's harder'n you thought? If yuh

mean yore face yo're out o' luck. She's always been that way, an' it gets harder the older yuh grow."

"Tom," said Red solemnly, "why do yuh say 'them things'?"

"Them things what? I ain't said nothin' about no things. What things yuh mean?"

"I mean 'them,' not 'things.' Don't yuh see?"

"Not for a minute I don't. What part of the head is the pain in? Maybe you better lie down a spell. Le's go sit down anyway — back where we was. Maybe it'll pass off."

"You don't understand," persisted Red, following Tom among the boulders. "I mean you'n me are plumb ignorant. We ain't — haven't got no education."

"Is that all?" said Tom comfortably, dropping full length on a patch of grass. "Is that what's makin' you talk so funny? I thought you was sick or somethin'. Shore, we got education. Can't we read an' write, huh? An' figger figgers too. What more education do we need'n that, I'd like to know? Education! You talk like yo're loco, Red."

"An' they's somethin' else," pursued Red, hot upon his subject. "We cuss an' swear alla time. We don't open our mouths but what we cuss high, wide an' frequent. That ain't no way to do, Tom. Ain't you got no decency?"

"Plenty. I got so much it hurts like a cramp. Yo're lettin' that girl honey-fuggle yuh, Red. She's been a-talkin' to yuh. I can see that as plain as the W G R brand, an' that takes up the whole side of a cow. When yuh gonna quit smokin' an' drinkin' an' all? This here love business is shore the devil!"

"Yeah, oh, yeah, shore an' y'bet yuh," sneered Red. "Yuh know yo're a-talkin' thisaway alla time 'cause no woman would look at yuh, yuh frazzled end of a misspent life. Yo're jealous, that's whatsa matter."

"Jealous? Jealous?" Tom cackled scornfully. "Jealous of you? Don't make me laugh! Which I'd as soon be jealous o' one o' my mules. Sooner, come to think. You can teach a mule somethin'. Couldn't teach you nothin' in forty years."

"If you was the teacher, it would shore take longer'n that. Yessir, Tom, yo're a low-down miserable worm. Yo're so lowdown an' so miserable you ain't even fit for bait, an' the funny part is you dunno it. Yo're satisfied to be a worm with nothin' in sight when yuh git old an' skinny but false teeth and rheumatics. No li'l home an' a wife for Tom Kane. Nawsir, he'd rather be a worm an' slime round with the other reptyles."

"You bet he would!" cried the thoroughly provoked Tom. "He ain't no fool, whatever else he is, you can gamble on that! But you go on an' get married an' have yore wife an' yore home if yuh wanna. Go to yore finish any way yuh like. I ain't sayin' a word, not a word. I guess maybe I got somethin' to do, besides lookout yore game, old settler. Quit that now. Don't yuh heave no more pebbles, or I'll —"

"W'at ees de mattair?" interrupted a disapproving voice at their backs. "You was mak' a noise so I was hear you 'way off yonder, un you was not hear me w'en I ride een un tie my pony een de tamarack. You have de shut ear, by gar."

"Tom's always gettin' loud, Telescope," said Red as the half-breed noiselessly slid up and squatted down between them. "Yuh know how his tongue works when he's excited over anythin'. He's gotta tell the neighbors all about it too. I spoke to him several times, but —"

"Aw, shut up, Red. Le's hear what Telescope's got to say."

"Jake ees steel at Cutter," said Telescope, "un dem tree strangair dey hang roun' de jail all tam. Kansas

Casey stay wit' dem, *bien sur*. Dey are not many pony tie to de heetchin'-rail — aw, ten, mabbeso."

Red looked eastward.

"The moon won't rise for three hours," he said. "Let's go."

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

THE CALABOOSE

THEY mounted and fetched a wide semicircle about Farewell. Approaching the town from the west, they proceeded with great caution to the rear of Tom Kane's corral. Here they dismounted, and Tom Kane brought Jack Owens' saddle from the house and cinched it on his toughest animal, a wise strawberry-roan with a hammer-head.

"I hope Bill Lainey won't come pilin' over for a last look before turnin' in," whispered Tom, tucking in the loose end of the cinch strap.

"It'd be just like him," returned Red. "You'd oughta got Mike Flynn to look after yore hosses. He's always busy in the evenin'."

Some one turned the corner of Tom Kane's house and came toward the corral. The footsteps were shufflingly heavy. The man's breathing was as heavy as his walk. They heard him say aloud in wheezing tones:

"I know I closed the gate. I know I did."

Tom and Telescope froze to their horses' heads. Red, nearest to the partly closed gate, tiptoed across the corral toward it. He made no attempt to lift the lever hanging by its yard-long wire. Instead, he crouched beside the gate and waited, one doubled fist resting knuckles down upon the ground.

"I hate to do it," he thought. "I shore do, but —"

The man stopped at the gate and, standing a little sidewise, put his hand upon the top crossbar. Red Kane

straightened his long body with a jerk and drove his hard fist accurately home beneath the man's left ear. The man dropped like a mauled steer and lay spread-eagled, his face to the sky and his feet in a cluster of bitterweed.

"Bill Lainey, shore," whispered Red in answer to his brother's low-voiced question. "He'll be out for ten minutes. We gotta gag him. This stick'll do. Naw, not yore handkerchief, Tom. They could trace that. Take his. Ease him over so's we can get his suspenders off. They'll do to tie his feet with. Lordy, ain't he a fat lummox! . . . Huh? Hafta rip his sleeves out. Shore, tear 'em in two, an' they'll be long enough to tie his hands together. Here, lemme do it, butter-fingers!"

"Butter-fingers yoreself!" snarled Tom. "I'm doin' this. Get that cayuse out. Want me to do everythin'?"

Red, having attained his object, snickered and crossed to the strawberry-roan. He led the horse through the gate, round the corner of the corral and ranged him with the other three animals at the rear.

Red returned to the corral and looked up at the inverted bowl of the star-speckled sky. Then he lowered his gaze to where the black mass of Farewell's buildings cut jaggedly across one side of the bowl.

The town was quiet — too quiet. It was early in the evening, barely nine by the clock, yet sounds of roistering were few. At the least voices of three or four merry revelers should have been audible, but at that moment Calloway, the bibulous father of Sam Brown Calloway, was the sole individual moved to sing. He was no more than half drunk either, for he was singing the "Little Brown Jug." Blind drunk he either sang hymns or prayed in a loud voice.

Red Kane would have been better pleased to hear a hymn tune, for the singer seemed to be drawing near. He was coming through the narrow space between the blacksmith shop and Piney Jackson's house.

"The rose is red,
My nose is, too.
The violet's blue,
An' ——"

Thud! The singer had undoubtedly tripped and fallen upon his face. He got to his feet, calling upon his Maker, and proceeded at half speed. It is to be supposed that his course was erratic. Red heard him bump the corner of the blacksmith shop and a minute later fall over Piney Jackson's wheelbarrow which stood to the left some twenty yards.

In spite of the seriousness of the situation Red chuckled; then he went instantly cold with apprehension, for Calloway was without doubt fighting the wheelbarrow. It was one of Piney's valued possessions. The blacksmith might be at home. He might come out. He might investigate. And Piney Jackson could not be handled as easily as Bill Lainey. It was borne in upon Red that Calloway must be abolished.

He slid round the corner of the corral and ran full tilt into his brother Tom. The latter grunted, gasped and sat down, holding his stomach with both hands.

"Ah — Ow," groaned Tom, rocking his body. "Knock-wind — ow-wow-out-o'-mum-me."

The unsympathetic Red did not halt. He continued on his groping way toward the spot where feet stamped and wood was splintering. Lord, if Piney should come upon the scene!

Smash! Crash! Calloway lifted the wheelbarrow aloft and brought it down hard upon the ground.

"There, —" began Calloway viciously.

That was as far as he went with that sentence, for the barrel of Red Kane's six-shooter smote him across the top of his flat-roofed skull, and he fell senseless upon the wreck of the wheelbarrow.

"Who's there?" demanded a woman's voice from a kitchen window of Piney's house.

Red thanked Heaven that it was not the blacksmith making inquiries and oozed backward softly as a cat.

"Who's there?"

The woman's tone was more insistent. Also her voice was louder. Red turned and fled on tiptoe as Mrs. Jackson reiterated her request for information.

At the corner of the corral he found his brother standing up and in a very bad temper.

"Helluva note!" Tom said in his ear. "My stomach won't be right for a week. Why'n't yuh look where yo're goin' 'stead o' bullin' along hell-bent and knockin' folks silly? I've a good mind — Whajja wake Mis' Jackson up for, yuh numskull? She'll yell a week now. I s'pose you thought yuh'd make my job easier, didn't yuh?"

"I couldn't help it if Calloway was drunk, could I? He'd 'a' fell over Bill Lainey before we could move him if I hadn't bent a gun on his head. There, she's stopped a-squallin' an' closed the window. We gotta move, Tom. Y'all right now?"

"Oh, shore. I feel fine. Wait till all this here's over, I'll make yuh sweat for what I've gone through. My own barn too. Lookit here, Red, the more I think o' this the less I like it. S'pose now the town goes up. Everythin's dry as a covered bridge. An' Kennedy's barn'll catch. S'pose — "

"They ain't no s'posin'," declared Red as fiercely as whispering would permit. "We gotta do it my way. She's the only wagon-track out, Tom. Ain't I thought it all out careful? We gotta do it, I tell yuh. We gotta. The town won't catch. They's a li'l breeze, an' she's east. Kennedy's barn won't go. They'll save her if they work hard. If his barn does go, it can't be helped, an' he's out o' luck, thassall."

"Aw right, aw right," said Tom. "Lookit now, you leave my hoss under the cutbank by the spruce like we said — *under* the bank, yuh hear, where they won't be no danger o' folks seein' him in the light."

"Shore, shore, an' don't wait for me in them tamaracks more'n a hour. If I ain't there by then, ride into town. But I'll be there. Here — Hey! wait a shake, Tom. Where's the ax? You done forgot to get me it."

Tom swore under his breath and started toward the house. In two minutes he was back.

"Here," he whispered, thrusting the handle of the ax into Red's hand. "We'd ought to cut down Telescope's time. We don't want to wait too long, an' we've been held back a lot already."

"Can't be did. He's gotta have the full ten minutes. He can't just get in town an' then have things start a-poppin'. She wouldn't look natural, nawsir."

"Aw right. You know it all. Have it yore own way. Ten minutes! Don't talk to me! Shut up! In ten minutes by countin' I scratch that match."

Tom melted into the darkness. Red waited till he heard the gentle creak of an opening barn door; then he went along the corral stockade till he came to where Telescope stood with the four horses.

"All ready, Telescope," he whispered. "Let's go."

Telescope and his mount vanished like smoke. Red cocked an ear toward the Jackson residence. Hearing no sound, he led the three remaining horses rapidly to his left front till he came to the cutbank above which grew a lone spruce tree. Here, below the cutbank, he tied Tom's horse to a naked root. At the top of the bank, two bridles in the crook of his arm, he paused to listen.

Tuckety-tuck, tuckety-tuck. A horseman was riding up Main Street. The hoofbeats stilled in the neighborhood of the Happy Heart Saloon.

"Telescope," murmured Red, and started onward hast-

ily — but not so hastily as he began to move when some forty-five seconds later a woman's wild shriek tore the silence into shreds. The shriek was followed by others no less wild.

The shrieks came from the direction of the Jackson residence. Red guessed — and, as he discovered later, guessed correctly — that Mrs. Jackson, on her way to investigate the cause of the disturbance that had broken her early slumber, had stumbled upon the body of the senseless Calloway.

Red, abandoning caution so far as moving silently was concerned, boarded his mount and rammed home the spurs. Behind a tree-checkered fold in the landscape directly in rear of the Farewell jail he dragged his horse to a halt. Encumbered as he was by the heavy ax, Red, because the strawberry-roan he was leading did not stop on the dot, narrowly escaped a trampling.

He made fast the two horses to the trunks of separate cedars and scuttled through the scattering trees up and over the rising ground. As he topped the crest, came a sparkle of light on his right hand. A flicker, a flare, a flame that leaped, and the barn of Tom Kane was ablaze.

"Two minutes ahead of time!" panted Red resentfully and ran a trifle faster.

It was a long two hundred yards from where the horses were tied to the jail, but Red's time for three-quarters of the distance would not have disgraced a trained and fit track man.

Forty yards from the jail, in a discouraged growth of scraggly bushes, Red stopped. There was a lighted window in the rear room of the jail. Red fingered the broad back of the ax-head and waited, his eyes on the lighted window. A long rectangle to the right of the shorter one suddenly sprang into bright relief. Some one had opened the door.

The some one stood in the doorway. The some one

was Kansas Casey. Behind Kansas Casey were other men. Red could not be certain of their number. The lights and shadows were baffling.

All up and down Main Street folk were uttering hearty bawls of "Fire!" that quite drowned the screams of Mrs. Jackson.

The barn was burning finely now. The flames fed on the dry logs and shakes as on match-wood. They whipped up the end wall and snapped across the roof in bursts of vivid orange that crackled and coughed and tossed on high their showers of sparks.

A little breeze was blowing the sparks away from the town, but toward Kennedy's barn. Red sincerely hoped that Kennedy wouldn't lose his barn. He had no desire to pay Kennedy as well as Tom.

"Dees way! Dees way! We gotta save de barn!"

Red recognized in the stentorian shout the voice of Telescope Laguerre. The half-breed was doing his part exactly by the book.

Against the light of the flames Red saw the figures of running men. The men called and shouted one to another, but ever above their cries sounded the thundering bellow of Telescope Laguerre, urging, exhorting, advising, whooping on the fire-fighters.

It was then that Kansas Casey left his post on the doorsill of the calaboose and hurried toward the fire. One of the men who had stood at his back in the doorway followed. The other two — Red could see now that they were but two, and these two were Billy Bruff and Tom Lumley — stepped outside and stood with thumbs tucked behind their belts, gazing at the blaze.

There was nothing to be gained by waiting longer. Red gripped the ax and slid obliquely through the bushes toward the rear of the two observers.

Nothing is quite so engrossing as a conflagration. Ordinarily wide-awake, hard-headed citizens of the world

become oblivious to everything but the fascinating flames when watching a fire. So it was with Mr. Lumley and Mr. Bruff. They had not the slightest idea that any one wishing them evil was in their vicinity till a pleasant voice behind them said:

"Reach up an' grab yore ears."

Mr. Lumley and Mr. Bruff came alive on the jump. They reached up and seized the lobes of their ears — seized them with enthusiasm as if they feared the valued organs were on the point of departure.

"Le's slide into the jail now," continued the voice, "an' le's be gentle about it. Le's not have no pullin' at no guns. Mister Lumley will go first. No, wait till I give the word. When Mister Lumley crosses the sill, he will throw up his hands just as high as he can reach. Mister Bruff will do the same. Start, an' don't hurry."

Mr. Lumley and Mr. Bruff entered the lamplit room with careful slowness. They might have been walking on eggs. Under the shepherding of Red Kane they shuffled across the room and aligned themselves side by side against the wall.

"I'd stick my hands a li'l higher, Mister Lumley, if I was you," suggested Mr. Kane.

The Rock County sheriff reached frantically toward the ceiling. Red Kane, although his captives could not see him, nodded approvingly.

"Keep a-doin' that an' you'll be all right," he drawled. "Charmin' Billy with the whiskers will now oblige the audience by takin' off his belt an' droppin' it on the floor — all without malice aforethought an' reachin' for his artillery. You hear me, William?"

William obeyed nervously. Belt and gun dropped to the floor with a swish and a thump. William shot his hands aloft without being told.

"Now, Thomas, do like Charmin' Billy done," said Mr. Kane quietly — no one could have guessed from his

manner and speech that he stood in peril of his life. "That's right, Thomas. Up with them paws, Thomas. Don't try to gamble with me, Thomas. You'll only *try*, thassall. 'If at first you don't succeed, try, try again', is one fine rule, old-timer, but it won't work against my six-shooter. I will now pick up yore belts an' guns. Don't move. I can get 'em. Don't turn round. Keep them noses flat against the wall. If they's splinters in the wood, yo're out o' luck. Have yuh got the key to the calaboose door, Thomas?"

"No," growled Thomas.

"Next, Charmin' Billy," pursued the good-natured voice.

"I ain't got it, —— —— you!" snapped Charming Billy.

"Such language," said Red reprovingly. "You must think yo're at home, Charmin' Billy. I s'pose now Kansas has the key — both keys, inside and outside, huh? He has? I thought that would be the way of it; so I brought a key with me. Charmin' Billy, step back three steps without turnin' round."

Charming Billy complied with the request. Red Kane tossed the ax past him against the wall.

"They's the key I brought," he continued. "Pick her up an' smash the lock."

Billy Bruff went at the task with vim. He smashed lock and bolt and nosing with three heavy blows and crashed the door wide open. Like a jack-in-the-box Ben Lenton appeared in the doorway.

"Don't turn round!" Red Kane reminded Billy Bruff. "Drop that ax an' flip up them hands. Now get back alongside yore friend. Ben, would you mind lookin' in the drawer o' that table an' roustin' out a couple o' pair of handcuffs? Jake keeps 'em there, or he used to."

Ben Lenton jerked the drawer open and dragged out two clinking pairs of door-hinge handcuffs.

"Stick yore hands in back of yuh, you two," ordered Red Kane.

Lumley and Bruff obeyed with exemplary meekness. Ben Lenton did his duty. The captives, hands clasped behind them, swayed a little on their feet.

"I know yore voice, Kane," said Lumley, "an' I can swear to it. So can Bruff. You needn't think just because you won't let us turn round yo're gonna get away with this."

"I never think," was the placid rejoinder. "I dunno how. I leave that for bright li'l fellers like you sports. Ben, they's a rope yonder in the corner. I dunno but —"

Here he suddenly bethought him of the figure cut by Mrs. Jackson when the window fell on her neck the day of the runaway stage teams. He laughed sardonically.

"Here's a better idea," he went on. "Slide over to the window, you fellers. No, the side window. Lay yore Adam's apples on the sill. Go'n, lay 'em down. Whatcha scared of? The sill ain't sharp. That's the boy. Ben, s'pose now you knock out the brace that holds up the sash."

Lenton had the brace in his hand in a split second. The sash — it was a freely running window — came down with a crumph-h. The snared ones kicked out like bee-stung horses.

"That window moved pretty easy," observed Red, eying it thoughtfully. "Guess we better wedge it tight."

So with the prisoners' own pocket knives they wedged the window.

"Let's go," said Red, and he picked up the ax.

They went hurriedly. Away to the left they saw, as they crossed the open ground between the jail and the patch of brush, the burning barn flaring redly. There were shouting and noise, and men ceased not to carry and pour buckets of water.

Once past the edge of the brush the posts of the Happy Heart corral would be between them and the fire and its spectators. When they ran in among the swishing bushes, a man rose up from under their feet. Red perceived just in time that it was his brother Tom.

"Next time holler!" he exclaimed with irritation, sheathing his Colt. "You might 'a' got plugged."

"Shut up," was the amiable return. "Keep a-goin', keep a-goin'!"

They arrived among the horses somewhat blown as to the lungs and shaky as to the legs.

"Lookit here," began Lenton, who till the present moment had not spoken, "lookit here, gents. I can't say —"

"Don't say it then," advised Red earnestly, desirous of forestalling possible thanks. "They ain't no time, anyway. You climb on that cayuse there — yeah, the one with the monkey-nose taps — an' ride due east till yuh come in sight of a bald-headed mountain with an easy-slopin' top. That's Triangle Mountain a-stickin' up over where the Fallin' Horse runs into the Lazy. Keep a-goin' an' ford the Lazy above the Fallin' Horse about five miles at the south end of a round-backed ridge. Yo're across the Lazy now an' the ridge is on yore right. From there you'll see three crackin' ol' peaks in a row like off to the southwest, an' beyond 'em a sawtooth range. Them three big peaks are the Three Sisters, an' the sawtooth range is the Three Sisters Range, an', when you get past them three peaks in among that tangle o' mountains an' cañons, you'll be as safe as a flea on a long-haired dog. You go there an' stay there. They's plenty deer when yuh run short o' bacon —"

"I put two sides in the off saddle pocket," interrupted Tom.

"So yuh'll make out all right," continued Red. "They's coffee, sugar an' such in the cantinas an' ten boxes o' rifle cartridges an' five for yore six-shooter.

They's a six-shooter in one of the saddle pockets an' a Winchester tied to the saddle strings. We didn't have no scabbard."

"Gents —" Lenton began again.

"Wait a shake," Red pursued rapidly. "Here's a li'l calendar. Every tenth day in the month — like the tenth, twentieth, an' thirtieth, see — you come down in the foothills along the Fallin' Horse where you can get a sight o' Triangle Mountain. When you see a smoke on top o' Triangle, you come straight home to yore shack by Sweetwater, 'cause everythin'll be all right. Mind yuh now, that smoke may not be the first tenth day, nor the second nor third, an' it mayn't come in the second month even, but it'll come, an' yuh can stick a pin in that. Naw, naw, now. Don't say nothin'. They ain't time. Yo're all right, an' yore daughter's all right, an' everythin's gonna come out all right. Nemmine how. It will. Git aboard, Ben. Did yuh remember all them directions? Aw right, git."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

ONE DOWN

Red and Tom dismounted among the boulders at the mouth of the little draw where the tamaracks grew. Red dropped the reins over his horse's nose and, lying down on his back, clasped his hands behind his head and stared with half-closed eyes at the stars.

"Lordy," he sighed, "this is somethin' like comfort. I need a rest. I've done been a-workin' my head off since mornin'."

"Har, har," Tom barked in a repressed tone, "an' har, har once more. You need a rest! You've been a-workin' yore head off! That's good, that is! An' what have the rest of us been doin', I'd like to know?"

"Oh, yuh've done all right," Red drawled. "But, Lordy, Tom, how could yuh help doin' all right? Didn't I plan it out for yuh so careful a two-year-old baby couldn't 'a' made a mistake? Didn't I? 'Course I did. Do I hear yuh say 'yes'? I don't hear yuh say 'yes.' Yo're jealous again, thassall. If I had yore disagreeable nature, I'd go drown it some'ers. Stop jabbin' me in the ribs, yuh Siwash! Ouch, that quirt's got a nail in the handle, an' my ribs ain't iron. If you tear my shirt, I'll shore clout yuh one on the snoozer. Lemme alone, will yuh? I'll kick yuh good, I will. Told yuh I would. I'm glad it *is* yore funny-bone. Serves yuh right. I'll crack the other one next time, an' I'll bet yuh tore my shirt. If I wasn't so comfortable, I'd look, an' if it was tore, I'd scalp you prompt if not sooner. What was yuh doin' in

that patch o' brush, Tom? Why didn't yuh ride straight here?"

"'Cause I didn't know how yuh was gonna come out with them two sharps," replied the somewhat ruffled Tom, rubbing a tingling elbow. "I was squattin' in them bushes ever since Bruff smashed the door down. I'd 'a' come straight in myself only I knowed I'd do better to watch outside. Lordy, you was slow. What was the matter with yuh anyway? Did yuh stop to make speeches? Hell's bells, I was sweatin' blood with my eyes stickin' out o' my head a foot thinkin' alla time some investigatin' jigger would sift round the corner of the Happy Heart corral an' I'd have to down him. Did yuh bring my ax?"

"Shore, she's tied to my saddle strings. Whatcha guess? Think I'd leave it behind?"

"Be just like yuh."

"Where yuh goin'? Lay still, can't yuh? What yuh wanna scout round for, huh?"

"I gotta bury this ax. They's no sense in totin' her round an' gettin' caught with it. You don't think of everythin', do yuh?"

But Red merely laughed and rolled over on his side. When Tom returned from his labor, Red sat up and moved crabwise to a concave-sided boulder. Against the grateful curve of the now thoroughly cooled rock he eased his damp back.

"You better go to sleep, Tom," he suggested. "I'll wake yuh up at one o'clock. 'Sno use yore startin' before."

Within two minutes Tom was sleeping — hard.

"Sounds like a sawmill," observed Red, and then, his thoughts drifting to the ranch-house under Sweetwater Mountain, he promptly forgot Tom and his works.

At one o'clock, with the rising moon drenching the face of the land with gray-green splendor, Tom was

shaken awake and started off to Farewell. There was nothing dead and alive about the town when he reached it. Some of the inhabitants were roaming the length and breadth of Main Street. Others were congregated in front of the Happy Heart. Still others were grouped round the doorway of Bill Lainey's hotel. Tom heard the voice of Bill Lainey orating to the multitude. He turned his horse's head toward the hotel. Bill Lainey and his cluster of listeners did not perceive Tom's approach till he stopped his horse at the edge of the sidewalk and called —

"'Lo, Bill. What's up?"

"Here's Tom now!" cried Daly, and every individual member of the group whirled to face the street.

"Yore barn's burned down!" supplied Piggy Wadsworth.

"Yore strawberry roan's stole!" was the wheezing contribution of Bill Lainey.

"Huh?" grunted Tom unbelievingly, pushing his hat back and scratching his evebrows. "My barn burned! My roan rustled! What yuh talkin' about?"

They enlightened him with circumstance and detail. Collectively they offered to show him the ruins of the barn.

"If she's burned down, they's no use lookin' at it now," he said practically. "Yuh say somebody hit yuh, Bill, when yuh was comin' across to take a last look at the corral gate?"

"Somebody!" Bill exclaimed. "Somebody! You'd say so! They was six of 'em if they was one, an' they all jumped me together! An' I fit an' they fit, but I didn't have no gun, an' all I could do was knock down three of 'em. Then one of the others hit me under the ear with a neck-yoke an' I didn't remember nothin' after that till I come to on my dinin'-room table with Lize a-burnin' feathers under my nose an' like to strangled

me. My jaw's all swole up, an' I can't open my mouth only just so far."

"Six of 'em — six rustlers," Tom said slowly.

"Six anyway," Bill Lainey insisted. "Maybe seven. But I'm shore o' six 'cause I counted 'em. An' they was hellions! Calloway, bein' half-drunk, drifted into 'em by mistake, an' they like to beat him to death with Piney Jackson's wheelbarrow. Mrs. Jackson she heard 'em, but she thought maybe it was just a drunkard or two amusin' themselves till she come out an' fell over Calloway's legs. A wheelbarrow! The gent that can use a wheelbarrow for a club is strong as a hoss. If they was all like that one, I ain't surprised I couldn't lick the bunch. Well, three out of eight ain't bad."

"Eight," Daly nipped in. "I thought you said seven."

"He said six first," averred Piney Jackson.

"Six or seven or eight, she's alla same," Bill declared with lofty dignity. "I didn't have no time to keep tally o' the whole outfit. But they was six I seen, an' I guess they was more — they must 'a' been to make that Colorado sheriff an' his deputy lay down — an' anyhow I licked three of 'em good. Knocked 'em flat, so I did."

"'Colorado sheriff,'" repeated Tom. "What's he gotta do with it?"

A silence fell upon the multitude. Its component parts looked all ways save at the man on the pony. Tom Kane stared, wrinkling a puzzled forehead.

"Whatsa matter?" he asked finally.

"Well," Daly offered hesitatingly, "they say, them Colorado gents do, that they was held up by several men, an' the prisoner took away. I dunno nothin' about that," he added carefully. "All I know is Lumley an' Bruff was handcuffed an' their heads stuck under the window sash in the back room of the calaboose an' the prisoner gone when Kansas Casey an' Rouse got back from the fire. I dunno no more'n that."

"You sound like you was apologizin'," drawled Tom. "Whaffor? Whadda I care about them Colorado gents?"

"You see, Tom," said Piney Jackson, "them sharps is sort o' sayin' yore brother Red was foreman of the gang that held 'em up."

"They do, huh?" Tom remarked in an ominously quiet voice. "She's shore a calamity Red ain't here to speak for himself. But maybe I'll do. Where are these gents?"

"Lumley an' Bruff are off with Kansas an' a posse after Lenton," replied Piney Jackson. "Telescope's a-trailin' for 'em. They oughta be some'ers round Sweetwater Mountain by now."

"Lumley an' Bruff make two. Where's the Rouse party?"

"I guess maybe he's in the Happy Heart," hazarded Bill Lainey.

Immediately Tom Kane dismounted, tied his pony to the hotel hitching rail, pulled down his vest and started on foot toward the Happy Heart. By twos and threes Bill Lainey's audience followed at a distance.

Tom, expert in single combat that he was, glanced through a window of the Happy Heart before entering. He marked down his prey standing at the bar. The prey was deep in converse with the bartender, a stage-station hostler and a few representative townsmen. Mr. Rouse was doing most of the talking.

Tom pushed through the doorway and headed in the direction of Mr. Rouse. The bartender saw him coming and sidestepped out of range. The stage-station hostler was not a breath later in following the example of the bartender. The representative townsmen backed their various ways elsewhere. The eyes of Dunc Rouse widened. Then, at a touch on his shoulder, his eyelids flickered — twice.

He turned slowly, his hands held carefully above the

level of the bar, and became aware that the tip of his curiously twisted nose was no more than a foot distant from the hardset features of Tom Kane.

The latter's quiet eyes gazed steadily into the close-set, sharp little eyes of Dunc Rouse. A full minute the two men stared eye to eye, and then Rouse could no longer endure that bleak gaze. His eyes wavered, dropped, came back, swiveled right and left and then fixed themselves on the left shoulder of Tom's flannel shirt. The sweat stood out in tiny drops on the forehead of Dunc Rouse. His lips were dry. So was the roof of his mouth. His tongue got furtively to work.

He was not a coward, — that is, he was not when he had time to prepare himself for the issue. But Tom Kane had taken him by surprise. Tom Kane had gotten the jump on him and thereby shaken his balance sorely. For the clean courage to go after his gun he would have willingly exchanged all his worldly goods. Yet why should he go after his gun? Tom Kane was doing nothing but look at him.

"What — " began Dunc Rouse and smiled a smile that strove to be cheerful but was merely more twisted than his nose.

"What's that I hear yo're sayin' about my brother Red?"

"Why — " Dunc Rouse tried again.

"Nemmine any 'whys'," snarled Tom. "Spit her out."

"I didn't say nothin' about him," protested Dunc Rouse.

"You didn't, huh?"

"No, I didn't. What would I wanna say anythin' about him for? I dunno nothin' about — "

"What's Lumley an' Bruff sayin' about him?" Tom was inexorable.

"Why — "

"Yo're always sayin' 'why' or 'what.' Don't yuh know nothin' else? Can't yuh answer? Aw right, I'll help yuh. I hear that them two hoss-thieves, Lumley an' Bruff, are sayin' my brother Red held 'em up an' busted in the calaboose an' let out Ben Lenton. Is that right?"

"They said so," corroborated Rouse, desperate with fear and shame.

"They're a couple o' liars, an' so are you," Tom declared warmly. "An' you don't dare draw that gun."

Dunc Rouse felt a slight sensation of nausea at the pit of his stomach. Being of an olive complexion, his face turned a sickly green. His right arm trembled. It trembled quite noticeably. But that was all it did — tremble.

"Where's yore nerve?" taunted Tom Kane.

The spectators held their breath — some of them. Others looked their scorn and contempt of the pitiable creature facing Tom Kane.

The latter laughed mockingly, reached downward a quick hand and jerked from its holster Rouse's six-shooter. With the other hand he slapped Rouse across the mouth. Dunc Rouse, his lips bleeding, cringing like a kicked and cowardly mongrel, shrank sidewise against the bar.

Tom Kane inserted his strong long fingers between Rouse's neck and neckband, yanked his head forward and slapped his jaws again and again. Rouse made not the slightest attempt at resistance. He acted like a man hypnotized by fear.

Tom released his hold on the man's collar, stepped back, set himself deliberately, and knocked Rouse flat. Rouse lay all a-sprawl a moment; then he drew up his knees and shielded his face with his arms as if he feared another blow.

The merciless Tom swung a leg and kicked Rouse three times in the ribs.

"Get up, you yaller pup," commanded Tom. "Get on yore feet before I drive yore slats in."

Thus adjured, Dunc Rouse scrambled up. Before he could straighten, Nemesis was upon him with fist and boot. Rouse skittered over the floor, through the doorway, across the sidewalk, and brought up under the hitching rail.

A heavy quirt hung conveniently to hand upon the saddlehorn of a pony tied to the rail. Tom Kane slipped the loop of the thong over his wrist, gripped the handle firmly and went at Dunc Rouse in earnest.

He drove the wretched man back into the saloon for his saddle and bridle. These two articles lay in a corner of one of the back rooms. Tom Kane indicated them by the simple expedient of rubbing Rouse's face on the leather.

"Pick 'em up," Tom ordered, drawing back his arm, "an' pack 'em out to the corral!"

"Ow! Wow! Wow!"

The fear-stricken man broke down utterly and screamed and screamed the while the quirt cut and slashed his flesh unsparingly.

Stumbling, rolling, the great tears running down his face, Dunc Rouse dragged saddle and bridle to the corral, caught up his horse — although how he managed that he never knew — and saddled it.

"Nemmine the hind cinch!" cried Tom Kane and kicked him into the saddle. "One's good enough to hold yuh on." He picked up the dragging rear cinch and cinch strap and flung them across the saddle in front of the reeling, weeping rider. "Now flit," he directed and quirted the horse across the rump.

The animal sprang forward and galloped straight away into the north.

"I guess that settles that," said Tom Kane, gazing after the bowed back of the broken Mr. Rouse. "Piney,

did yuh say the posse went Sweetwater way, huh? Yeah? Well, after we've all had a drink at the Happy Heart, I guess now I'll saddle me a fresh hoss an' slide out that-away myself. I'm kind o' anxious to get back that strawberry roan o' mine."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

THE SHOT

"THEY swallowed it hook, bob an' line," Tom said in concluding his recital of what had happened at Farewell. "They think maybe yo're innocent after all, an' so long's Jake an' Kansas an' Lumley don't get their legs over the pole, you'll be all right. Goddlemighty, if you could 'a' heard me spadin' out lies to 'em there in the Happy Heart after I'd gave Dunc Rouse the bum's rush out o' town! They got a sneakin' idea the holdups turned Lenton loose. I handed them that notion between drinks, an' they bit like it was corn bread. Before noon, after they've done talked it over good an' plenty, they'll be believin' it for gospel."

"I dunno as I like it," disapproved Red. "They'll think Lenton is in with the road agents now."

"Let 'em," Tom said confidently. "They think he's a murderer an' a robber anyway; so what's the odds? Where yuh goin', huh?"

"This here draw's shorter by two miles. I know. I've done rode her often enough. Besides, I ain't carin' nothin' about meetin' none o' the Bar S crowd. Leave it to li'l brother, Tommy old settler. He knows."

"He's got a head like a keg, li'l brother has — a empty keg. As I was sayin', I'll bet Telescope'll lead 'em on one savage ride."

"As you wasn't sayin', y'old goat. But I'll overlook the empty keg till we get some place where I can drop a buzz-bug down yore neck if yuh'll tell me some more. So Bill

Lainey thought me an' my knuckles was six men an' a neck-yoke, did he?"

"He made it eight men before he got through. By the time he tells you the story, it'll be forty men an' a wagon tongue. How you gonna pry the truth out o' Flipup, Red?"

Red ignored the abrupt change of subject. He smiled vacantly and rubbed an ear.

"Yeah," he drawled. "Was Bill's jaw swole much?"

"Not so much as yores'll be if I ever land on it. You heard what I said the first time. How you gonna —"

"Yore cayuse has picked up a rock," interrupted Red.

"Naw, he ain't. How —"

"What's that up there, Tom?" Red asked excitedly, pointing an agitated finger skyward.

"I'd say it was the sun, but I s'pose you got yore own private name for it. Most idjits have, I notice. How you gonna jerk the truth out o' Flipup?"

"Oh, yuh wanna know that, do yuh? Well — Gimme a match."

"Finish the sentence."

"Aw, yo're worse'n glue for stickin' to a thing. Can't yuh be contented without askin' fool questions an' botherin' yore betters an' —"

"How —" began anew the persistent Tom.

"I dunno." Red gave it up.

"Yuh dunno. Why don't yuh?"

"'Cause I don't."

"Yuh mean to say yo're traipsin' alla way to Flipup an' yuh dunno what yo're gonna do after yuh get there? Yo're a fine specimen, a fi-ine specimen. Where's them four-ace brains you was gassin' about awhile back?"

"Nemmine about them brains, feller. They ain't doin' no worryin', so you needn't."

"I needn't, huh? If I didn't worry I'd like to know where you'd be."

Red opened his mouth to reply — *Cra-ack!* The flat report of a distant rifle smacked the windless air.

"Behind that bald-headed ridge," murmured Red.

"Left o' the blue rock," determined Tom.

Now a gunshot may be entirely innocent of evil, and it may not. Until the precise nature of its intent has been established, it behooves the innocent bystander to proceed carefully.

A brook, bordered by a thick growth of box elder bushes and a marching line of cottonwoods lay between the ridge and the two men. They swung toward the little stream, swished through the box elders and splashed across. Away to their right a narrow draw where slim pines grew gashed the ridge.

They cantered to the draw, turned into it and threaded their way in and out among the tree trunks. The draw widened before them. The trees grew more thickly. When they reached the other end of the draw, they were deep in a wood of bull pine, spruce and cedar. Here was no crackling brush to clog their path, and the hoof-beats of the horses sounded softly on the thick covering of needles that blanketed the ground.

Tom, riding a length in advance, tossed up a hand and turned his pony on a dime.

"Horse tied yonder," he said in a loud whisper, jerking his head sidewise.

Red, following the motion with his eyes, saw a black-pointed bay rope-tied to a young cedar forty or fifty yards beyond his horse's ears — saw, too, those same ears cock and the horse's head go up. Savagely he swayed back on the curb and effectively dispelled the pony's intention of whinnying.

"Look out yore hoss don't whinner, Tom," he warned and, driving in the spurs, sent his mount to the right on the jump.

His brother followed.

A hundred yards away they dragged their ponies to a halt. The quick-witted Red flung himself from the saddle, snatched his Winchester from the scabbard under the fender and thrust his reins into the hands of Tom, who had been slow in dismounting.

"You hold the horses, Tom," said Red, "while I go see what's happened."

Before Tom could protest, Red had departed at speed. Tom burning with outrage, unstrapped his rope and tied both horses to the bole of a high-branched cedar. Swearing at Red under his breath, he jerked out his own rifle and, leaving the horses to whinny or not as they saw fit, he ran after his vanishing brother.

He caught up with him where he had halted behind the thick branches of a newly brought down windfall. The bay horse was not twenty yards away.

"Ain't that Buck Saylor's hoss?" whispered Red.

"Looks like it," was the snappish reply.

"It is," declared Red. "An' here comes Buck."

Hurrying through the wood came the Farewell express agent. A Winchester cuddled the hollow of his bent arm. His eyes roved from side to side. There was anxiety in the puckered forehead. The usually good-humored face was drawn and set.

Behind the windfall Red and Tom sank down upon their haunches. They knew Buck Saylor well, but they had no intention of speaking to him. For at that moment Buck did not look like a man who would give a greeting welcome, and to force oneself upon the attention of another engrossed in his own affairs is to commit a grave breach of cow-country etiquette. Buck Saylor reached his horse and jammed the rifle into its scabbard. He undid the knot of the tie-rope with fingers that trembled — that seemed all thumbs. Continually he glanced over his shoulder, now this way, now that way. It was obvious that Buck Saylor was in a state of mind.

He finished untying the horse, coiled the rope carelessly, and hooked it over the saddlehorn. Then, swinging up into the saddle, he returned the way he had come.

The two brothers followed at a distance. An eighth of a mile farther on they came to the edge of the trees. Here, flanked by the easy slope of the bald-headed ridge, was a pleasant, fan-shaped level, grass-covered, dimpled with shallow hollows, that swept away for miles to the foot of blue-green hills. A hundred yards out in the open three or four cottonwoods and a rank growth of red willows and box elders denoted the presence of a spring.

A thin line of pale smoke, straight as a four-sticker's mainmast and half as tall pointed skyward beyond the spring. At one side a hobbled horse grazed with quick, regular side sweeps of a long hammer head. The animal was so near that they could hear the tearing sound as it wrenched out each mouthful of the thick grass.

Buck Saylor, halting at the spring, was partly hidden by the cottonwoods. Then his horse moved forward a step, and they saw that Buck was leaning over his saddlehorn and looking at something on the ground. Which something, whatever it was, was completely masked by the red willows.

Buck Saylor continued to hold his embowed posture a long minute; then he straightened slowly, wheeled his horse and as slowly rode away. And rode away with chin on shoulder. But there was no possibility of him seeing the Kane boys. Each of them, hatless, was hugging the ground behind an individual spruce, peering with a cautious eye past the bark of his ambush.

"If Buck heads toward that notch between the humpy li'l hill an' the one with the square top, he's goin' back to Farewell," said Red.

"Guess that's where he's goin'," assented Tom as the express agent set his horse to trotting in the direction of the notch between the hills.

"Le's go see what's in them willers?" suggested Tom when the departing horseman had assumed the general outline of a post mounted upon a keg, indicating that he was at least distant the half of a mile.

"No," demurred Red. "Le's wait a shake — till he's a mile out, anyway. Somebody else may 'a' heard that shot besides us."

"Aw, say — "

"Listen, feller, everythin' might be all right, an' then again it mightn't. No sense in hurryin'. Go yuh ten even they's a dead gent a-layin' near that smoke."

"Ten even is too good. I kind o' think so myself about that gent."

"Make it ten to one then. Y'ain't afraid to lose one small measly buck, are yuh?" Tauntingly.

"Go yuh," Tom promptly took him up. "But yo're a robber, alla same."

When Buck Saylor was a mile away, Red and his brother, first lining up the cottonwoods and the willows between them and the rider, walked out to the spring.

"I win," said Red, staring down at the body huddled between a small campfire and a bubbling spring, the whole within a horseshoe of red willows.

They knew that the man was dead before they reached him. The position of the legs and arms told as much. As corroborative evidence the soggy, red-stained condition of the back of the man's vest was hardly needed. There was a skillet in which a lump of beef reposed amid congealing grease, held tightly by the fingers of the man's right hand. Beside his left elbow, where the left hand had dropped it, the contents of a spilt salt sack whitened the grass.

"They say she's unlucky to spill salt," observed Tom matter-of-factly, and, being thirsty, he knelt and drank at the spring.

Red turned over the body of the dead man. When he

saw the quiet features, he sat back on his heels and whistled. Tom got up, wiping his mouth, and looked at the face of the corpse.

"I wonder now," said Red, "what Buck Saylor had against Pickles Dill."

"Dunno." Tom shook his head. "They wasn't never exactly boom companions, but they wasn't hostyle neither."

"Drilled plumb through the ticker," amplified Red. "An' the front of his shirt's burnt. Buck must 'a' made certain shore by shovin' the Winchester almost into his breast pocket."

"Pickles didn't have no chance. Funny he didn't see Buck a-comin'."

"Maybe he did see Buck a-comin'."

"Huh?"

"Maybe he thought Buck was his friend an' wasn't expectin' no such play as this."

"We'll never know, I guess. Might's well bury him."

Using the skillet and Pickles' own skinning-knife as shovels, they cut away the sod and scooped out a shallow grave. They wrapped the body in Pickles' saddle-blanket, laid it in the grave and scraped the earth over it. On top of the mound they heaped a few rocks. This that those ubiquitous beasties, the coyotes, might not investigate.

Pickles' saddle and bridle they lashed to the branch of a cottonwood. Which being done, Red went out to the grazing horse and took off his hobbles.

"Git, feller," he said and slapped the horse on the flank with the leather circlets.

With a squeal and a two-heeled kick the animal galloped away. Red, returning, came to the tiny stream filtering from the spring. As he stepped across, a hoof-print on the margin of the rivulet caught his eye. This hoof-mark was the imprint of a hoof shod with a bar shoe.

Red crawled here and there on hands and knees to find other hoof-marks. He found them, faintly impressed, to be sure, but nevertheless unmistakable.

"What yuh doin'—eatin' grass?" called Tom.

Red rose to his feet and walked back to the spring.

"I just run across the mark of a bar shoe," he said quietly, "an' by the position of the others I found the bar shoe was on the near fore. The last we seen of Hollister, his gray hoss was wearin' a bar shoe on the near fore."

"What does that prove?"

"Nothin'—yet. It's—it's funny. I can't make it out."

"Lots o' things yuh can't make out. That's nothin' new."

"Well, when Hollister an' them three other jiggers passed us down by them tamaracks south of Farewell, they was headin' south. This could be their first camp."

"It could, but Hollister ain't here, an' Pickles is. So—"

"The more I look at this camp the more I don't think she's a one-man camp. Lordy, Tom, where are yore eyes? Lookit all them boot-marks. They're different sizes. One man couldn't 'a' made 'em all. I wish Telescope was here. They ain't nobody like him when it comes to readin' sign. I— Lookit them li'l tracks, Tom."

"Might a woman made 'em, huh?"

"She might, but she didn't. Hollister made 'em. I mind now how his boots was jomightyful small an' almost new—heels wasn't run over none. They was nothin' fancy about his spurs neither—plain, hand-forged ticklers they was, an' one of the points o' one rowel was busted short off."

"Which ain't got nothin' to do with us nor our job neither. C'mon, Red, le's drag it."

"Lookit!" cried Red excitedly, pointing an agitated finger toward the evergreen wood. "Lookit!"

Tom looked. A hobbled black horse was issuing from the wood and making his jerky way toward the spring.

"My black cayuse!" continued Red in a healthy bawl and with a fine disregard for possible listeners.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

ROCK COUNTY MEN

"YES, sir, old feller," said Red, rubbing the black's forehead and pulling his ears, "I shore never expected to see you again, y'old Mormon."

Contrary to the prevailing custom, Red had always made a great pet of the black. And the black meticulously repaid the debt by never bucking except on a frosty morning.

"If you'd only stop fondlin' that fool hoss," remarked Tom with sudden contempt, "yuh might help me roll these rocks off o' Pickles."

"For once in yore life, Tom, yuh got a real shore-nough idea. We did sort o' overlook a bet when we didn't search Pickles. Where did yuh throw that skillet?"

They exhumed the corpse, rolled it out of its blanket cocoon and searched the clothing carefully. They found nothing but valueless odds and ends, such as tobacco, matches, a pocketknife and some horse-shoe nails.

"Lordy," Red murmured disappointedly.

In the business of searching, the dead man's overalls had been slightly pulled up, baring to view a generous six or seven inches of boot above the right ankle. A pronounced bulging on the outside of that same ankle caught Red's eye. He laid hold of the boot at heel and toe and pulled it off. He upended it, and two gold watches thudded on the ground.

Observing this phenomenon, Tom pounced upon the

other boot and served it similarly. No timepieces rewarded Tom's effort, but four hundred and fifty dollars in gold did.

"Pickles Dill an' his li'l friends have been fiddlin' with the road-agent buşiness," said Red, picking up the fallen watches, "an' I'll go you one hundred to one that Pickles knowed plenty about the robbin' o' the express office. My li'l black hoss proves that."

"You won't do no bettin' with me," Tom assured him. "Yo're too lucky. Any marks on them alarm clocks?"

"Nary a mark. No wonder Buck Saylor downed him. I'd like to know how Buck found out. But why didn't Buck hang round here some'ers an' try to bushwack the others instead of lightin' out for home? An' why didn't he search him? S'funny."

"Yeah, ain't it? Pull yore end o' the blanket straight, Red, an' we'll roll him up again."

"Wait till I strap his arms in with his belt. They flopped every time we turned him over before. Aw ready yore end?"

Having reburied Pickles Dill, they did not linger in the vicinity. Red fashioned and fitted a hackamore for his new-found pony and led him behind the saddle when they rode away southward.

"Pickles an' Hollister makes two," said Red, as the fast-walking ponies rolled the miles behind them. "For a bet the other two of the four that passed us near the tamaracks was Durkin an' Cox."

"Durkin an' Lenn more like," was Tom's guess. "I seen Cox when I was in Farewell after the fire. He's still stiff in the arm. Shore, I know you run Spunk out o' town, but he could 'a' laid low in the hills some'ers. 'At's what I'd do in his case, an' likely he done it. The foxiness of Durkin an' Cox, the coyotes," he added with a grim laugh, "a-tryin' to saw off the blame for them robberies on Ben Lenton."

"It wasn't foxiness," denied Red. "It was common sense. It was their best play, an' I oughta guessed it sooner. But that's all right now."

"I guess," yawned Tom, who had been losing more sleep lately than he cared to think about, "I guess yes."

It was no part of wisdom to enter any towns in the region. Accordingly they avoided Marysville, Blossom on the railroad, and Fort Seymour, by the eminently safe margins of fifteen to twenty miles.

Ten days from the time they left the mouth of the draw near Farewell they rode down the straggling Main Street of Flipup in Rock County, Colorado.

In its general appearance Flipup differed not at all from Farewell. There were the same stores and saloons with their false fronts and ill-lettered signs, the same saggy-roofed houses and straggling corrals. But there was this variation between it and Farewell. Where the latter town owned but one dance-hall, Flipup flaunted three before the eyes of pleasure-bent folk.

BRADLEY USHER LENDS MONEY, BUYS ANYTHING. WHAT HAVE YOU?

The above sign, dirty white lettering on a faded black ground, strung its two lines across the entire false-fronted end of a log and shake building with four skylights, situated between two corrals.

"Seemin'ly he don't sell nothin'," observed Red with a barely perceptible nod toward the sign of the House of Usher.

"Lookit the size of his shack," muttered Tom, eyeing the length of roof visible above a corral stockade.

"Thirty foot wide an' a hundred foot long," mumbled Red. "A gent that buys anythin' has gotta have lots o' room."

"'Daisy Saloon, Brad Usher, Prop.'," read off Tom,

looking under his eyebrows at a saloon on the right flank of the California Store.

"'Brad Usher, Prop' owns the Pansy Saloon too," added Red, picking up another sign farther along the street.

"Not forgettin' 'Cards an' Roulette' next door to the Daisy."

"He's shore one reg'lar two-legged business man. He'll buy what yuh got or lend you money an' then get it back with faro an' licker. Maybe that's the gent now."

A tall, thin horse-faced citizen attired in black frock coat and trousers of the style affected by undertakers in good standing issued from the doorway beneath the "Bradley Usher Lends Money" sign and walked swiftly across the street.

The lean citizen was wearing a high, well-brushed beaver hat. As he crossed in front of Red and Tom, who had halted their horses as if undecided what to do next, he glanced at them with a gaze as intense as that of a wolf. He passed on, and, as he went, he removed his high hat, took therefrom a long rectangle of plug tobacco, haggled off a stout chew with his teeth and returned the tobacco to the hat and the hat to his head.

Ten seconds later the thin citizen, raising his foot to enter the Daisy Saloon, was run into head-on by a drunken man coming out. The thin citizen, without changing countenance in the slightest degree, seized the person over-served with liquor by the hair of his head and the slack of his belt, swung him waist-high and heaved him into the street.

The thin citizen, one long hand thrust suggestively beneath his coat tails, stood upon the sidewalk and regarded the liquored individual sprawling in the dust.

That one lay quietly on his face a full minute. His legs kicked a time or two. He squirmed over on his back, sat up and, supporting himself by his hands, bled copiously

from the nose. After a time he dragged himself to his feet and, carefully refraining from looking at the man on the sidewalk, staggered limpingly away. Then, and not till then, did the thin citizen enter the Daisy Saloon. It was noticeable that he backed in.

Red and Tom proceeded to the hotel without another word.

"Go yuh ten that quick-tempered lightnin'-rod is Brad Usher," whispered Red, his head under the left fender as he snaked out the cinch strap.

Tom sniffed his scorn of the proposition, dragged off saddle and bridle, and turned his attention to Red's black horse, which they had converted into a pack-animal. While they worked, came a stocky man who said he ran the hotel, and they caught him eyeing surreptitiously the brands on the three horses. Whereupon they felt themselves repaid for having spent the better part of the previous afternoon altering by the method known as hair-branding the black's Bar S into +8 and, in the case of Tom's two horses, the Lazy K into the Barb-Wire.

They carried their belongings into the hotel and bespoke a room. They were lucky enough to get one with but two cots, for they had no wish to be public. And usually the sleeping apartments of the common or garden variety of hotel in that region were public to excess.

They had come into town late in the morning. After dinner, which they ate without removing the stubble bristling on their cheeks and chins, they strolled — oh, so aimlessly — down the street to the California Store, which, they had been told by Miss Lenton, was owned by two of her father's friends, the Davis Brothers.

They bought tobacco in the California Store, but departed without mentioning to the Davis brother who waited upon them their acquaintance with Ben Lenton. That might come later. Red did not believe that to identify themselves with the town's solid citizens immediately

upon their arrival would advance their case. In matters of life and death, especially in a locality where life is guarded and death dispensed by the six-shooter, it is always better to know one's enemies first.

Strolling down one side of Main Street and up the other, they were careful to enter the combination saloon and gambling-joint bearing the name of Rouse's Rest.

The bartender, a precious-looking scoundrel with a cockeye, sold them the drinks and cigars they asked for and began to swab the bar industriously.

"Fine day, gents," said he, focusing his cockeye.

Red walked to the doorway and looked solemnly up at the sky.

"Yeah, it is," was his endorsement when he had redraped himself against the front of the bar. "I dunno when I seen a finer. Whadda you think, Tom?"

"I guess I seen a finer one down in the Nation. But this here'n ain't to be sneezed at. Barkeep, is they any chance of a feller gettin' into a li'l game round here?"

"Shore they is," replied the bartender, his features promptly losing the rather blank expression that had come upon them at Red's serious discussion of the weather. "Right in the back room, gents, right in the back room."

"He's a repeater, Tom," said Red, disapproval in the frank stare he switched on the cockeyed bartender.

The bartender resumed his look of blankness on the instant.

"In there," he nodded, flicking a thumb toward the open doorway giving into the back room.

A man lounged into the doorway. His hands were in his pockets, he wore no hat; his long, narrow head had been recently shingled. Red did not like his cold and fishy eyes, his pale clean-shaven skin, his pointed foxy nose and chin — there was nothing about the man that he did like.

"They's one of our dealers now," continued the bar-

tender, flirting his cockeye from Red to the man in the doorway. "He'll fix yuh up."

"'Walk into my parlor, said the spider to the fly'," quoted Red with a sardonic grin at the bartender. "This is shore handy. Oh, yes indeedy. Ain't it, Tom?"

"Y'bet yuh. When we want in a li'l game, we'll know where to come for action on our money. Whatsa matter, feller? What yuh lookin' so funny for? I'll bet yuh thought we wanted in on a li'l game now, didn't yuh?"

The bartender, experienced in the ways of drunken men, smiled as pleasantly as he knew how and achieved a most notable leer.

"No, no," said he, "I didn't think nothin' about it. I was just tryin' to help y'out. Take yore time, gents. No hurry. Our back room's always here."

Red frowned doubtfully upon him. He wagged his head in the manner of one far gone in drink. He hoped Tom would have the sense to play up.

"Don't yore back room ever take a vacation?" asked Red, his tongue slurring the words ever so little.

"Never," declared the bartender. "Have another, gents — on the house."

The bartender's cockeye roved for a fraction of a second toward the man in the back room's doorway. The man lounged lazily to the bar.

"Shake hands with Mr. Stratton, Mr. Dick Stratton," invited the bartender, leering at the two brothers. "Mr. Stratton is one of our prom'nent citizens," he elaborated. "Dunno what we'd do without Mr. Stratton."

Red Kane, stepping forward as if to shake hands, stumbled in a most natural fashion and literally fell on the neck of Mr. Dick Stratton. He did not paw the person of Mr. Dick Stratton to any extent, yet, when he had pulled away and given place to Tom he knew where Mr. Stratton kept his gun.

Tom's method was different. He gripped the hand of Mr. Stratton. He squeezed it. With his other hand he clung to the forearm of Mr. Stratton. The latter, while acknowledging the introduction, endeavored to draw back. But there was no loosening Tom's two-handed grip.

Mr. Stratton was aligned with them against the bar. Strong drink was urged upon him. He drank perforce, and, the bartender being occupied with a bottle that Red insisted contained a fly, the two brothers seized the occasion to empty their glasses on the floor. The liquor made no pool. There were cracks in the planking through which it promptly seeped. Remained merely a slight dampness on two boards.

"They's no fly in that bottle," averred the bartender, completing his investigation.

"Maybe he's dove down to the bottom," suggested Red, his voice taking on a thicker edge. "Flies is cute as coyotes, flies is."

"Har, har!" laughed Tom, as one who perceives a pleasantry. "Har, har!"

Red yearned to kick him. He feared Tom was overdoing it. For Mr. Stratton's cold and fishy eye was sharp likewise. Suspicion had not glazed it yet, but —

"How about that li'l gug — game?" said Red hastily. "Whu-why wait?"

Tom smote him between the shoulder-blades with a force that made him blink.

"Shore," he roared, dodging Red's kick. "You got the right idea, old settler."

"But — but we ain't got nobody to play with," said Red, feigning to forget what the bartender had said concerning Mr. Stratton.

"That's easy fixed," pronounced Mr. Stratton, rubbing an ankle, for Tom, evading Red's kick, had severely jabbed him with a spur. "I ain't got nothin' to do just now."

"We — we'd oughta have sus-somebody else," qualified Red.

"Shore," chipped in Tom. "A three-handed game ain't nothin'. I wanna play draw m'self."

"I'll get somebody," said Mr. Stratton and went out.

Within three minutes he returned, in his wake a wizen-faced man with the palest eyes ever a man used to stare with. Wizen-Face, it seemed, was another prominent citizen, a Mr. Art Teller. He liked nothing better than playing cards.

The four retired to the back room. On cutting for the deal, Red won. Shuffling the cards, he found that it was a "short-card" deck — that is to say, the ends of certain cards had been filed, thus making it comparatively simple for the crooked gambler to do as he pleased. It is not one of the most skillful methods of cheating, and the knowing citizen may detect it, but against the shorthorn and the drunken man it answers the purpose to admiration.

Red knew — knew without raising his eyes — that Mr. Stratton and Mr. Teller were watching him like the proverbial hawks. But Red was not a shorthorn. He was distinctly a longhorn from the top of his red head to the rowels of his Cross L spurs.

He dealt the cards without the flutter of an eyelid. But he was careful to deal as the mellowed one deals — with many an extravagant and aimless gesture. Two cards even flipped over the edge of the table into Mr. Stratton's lap.

Red picked up his hand and arranged it with fingers that shook. Red's head wabbled on his shoulders. His body swayed a little. Tom followed his example, adding thereto a loose-lipped mouth and dropped chin.

The ante was small; the bets were small; the pots were small. Red had difficulty in losing ten dollars. Tom won six.

Red drew a twenty-dollar gold piece from his pocket and sent it spinning across the table to Mr. Stratton.

"Gimme stack o' reds," said he. "They's more where that canary came from."

"They won't be if yuh keep slingin' 'em round thataway," mumbled Tom, uncertain what to say, and resolved to play safe.

What was Red driving at?

"Whadda we care for poverty an' precious stones?" said Red, arranging his chips with drunken solemnity. "We ain't got nothin' on our minds but our hats an', if we wanna buy this s'loon, buy two-three s'loons, we — we'll do it! Alla same, Tom — " here Red, having drawn a poor hand, dropped his cards face up on the table — "we'd oughta got more for that ranch. The cows was all right — no kick comin' on that price. But the hosses oughta brought a lot more — a lot mum-more. An' I could 'a' got it only you was in a sweat to drag it. 'Oh, no,' says you. 'We got enough. Why be a hawg?' An' I, like a fool, let it go at that. Gents," he went on, appealing to Messrs. Stratton and Teller, "tut-two thousand more we could 'a' got for that ranch. Think of it, gents! Tut-two thousand whole, hard, round, cold wheels we could 'a' gug-got if I'd worked it right by holdin' out. When them ruh-rich jiggers want anythin', they don't care what they pay. Nawsir, they'll spend money like it was nothin'. Tut-two thousand dollars all wasted — just wasted. Wouldn't it make yuh sick, gents? I'm askin' yuh, wouldn't it?"

The two gentlemen agreed politely that it would. Mr. Teller smothered a cough. Mr. Stratton felt a warm glow permeating his sinful being. Two thousand dollars more, eh? In that case the total amount paid over for the two drunkards' ranch must have been something quite worth while.

"Lordy," said Red, looking down at the cards he had

dropped, "them cards fell face up, didn't they? We'll deal that huh-hand over."

"We will like —" cried Mr. Art Teller, who sat facing Red Kane.

Mr. Teller could never be quite certain how it happened, but the next instant the table edge struck him a violent blow in the pit of the stomach and he went over backward, his chair going with him, and landed with nauseating force on the unyielding floor. Chips rattled about Mr. Teller. Then the table — for Red had continued his primary motion — landed upside down on top of him.

Mr. Teller, who from the first had made earnest efforts to draw his six-shooter, released his grip on the butt and gasped. With a whoop Red jumped on the overset table and danced upon it. Mr. Teller squeaked — he squeaked amain.

Tom, squared back against the wall, yelled with laughter — and kept both eyes riveted on the bartender, who had darted into the back room at Art Teller's initial outcry, and Mr. Dick Stratton. Both men looked uncertainly at Red and the wriggling feet and hands of Mr. Teller. These members were all that was visible of him. For the table was of the kitchen variety and it had gone over lengthwise.

Red took hold of the legs and rocked the table. Then he stamped upon the thick wood and split it from end to end.

"Table's bub-busted!" he cried, grinning foolishly, and drove a spurred heel through the split and ground it into Mr. Teller's abdomen.

Mr. Stratton glanced at Tom. What he saw appeared to satisfy him.

"Gimme the bung-starter," he whispered to the bartender.

"No," said the sharp-eared Tom with decision, "no

bung-starter. Leave him have his fun out. He don't mean no harm, Reddy don't. He's just playin' with that jigger, an' he's — "

"He's killin' him!" exclaimed Dick Stratton, as Art Teller wheezed faintly.

"Serve him right," was Tom's philosophical dictum. "He hadn't oughta crossed Red when he's drunk. Anybody 'at knowed Red could 'a' told him that. He'll know better next time."

Dick Stratton hesitated. Art Teller was his friend, his accomplice if you like, but Dick was not moved to die for him or run unnecessary risk on his account. And there was risk, judging by the way that infernal person called Tom kept fingering the butt of his six-shooter. It is one of the defects of the great American weapon that it kills for the drunken as well as for the sober, and there is always more than a fair chance that the drunken will shoot on small provocation.

Dick Stratton continued to hesitate.

"He'll be through in a minute," observed Tom Kane placidly, not forgetting to sway his body in his best intoxicated manner.

It was the slack hour of the day, but half a dozen men, attracted by the yells and thumpings, had stopped in to see the fun. Crowding together in the doorway, peering over each other's shoulders, they watched the fracas with interest. But their expressions remained noncommittal. By which it may be inferred that they felt none too kindly toward Art Teller. Had it been otherwise, there would have been open disapproval. For Red and Tom were strangers and alone.

"Get the marshal, will yuh, Sam?" called the bartender to one of the spectators in the doorway.

"No marshals neither," forbade Tom. "I'm drunk. I know it. So's my brother. But I'm tellin' you flat, gents, if any marshal horns into this fraycas I turn both

guns loose. I'm a peaceable citizen, but I don't allow nobody to run no blazers on me. I'll try to get my brother away, if yuh like, but no marshals."

"I wasn't going for no marshal nohow," denied the man called Sam. "I ain't lost no marshals. 'Cockeye' can roust out his own marshals."

Cockeye, who it seems was the bartender, affected not to hear and centered all his attention on Red and the table. Tom approached his brother cautiously. He took hold of Red's shoulder. Red immediately jerked away from him, dropped on his knees, flung aside the remnants of the table and clawed and clutched the throat of Art Teller.

The latter, already finding great difficulty in breathing, went purple as to the face and popping as to the eyes when Red fastened his eight long fingers at the back of his neck and two strong thumbs on his windpipe.

"Leggo, Red," urged Tom loudly. "Leggo, will yuh? There's a good feller."

But the good feller was not inclined to do any such thing. He continued to manhandle the unfortunate Art Teller. In which business the front of the wretched man's shirt was ripped in three places. Red, the pastime palling, ceased choking Art Teller and sat back on his heels — the heels were rooting into Art Teller's stomach at the time.

"Lookit here, yuh lousy pup," he remarked seriously, shaking a lean forefinger in the face of the all but unconscious man, "don't you never tell me I can't do what I wanna do. An' don't you never swear at me neither. I'm liable to lose my temper an' treat yuh rough if yuh do. Say 'Uncle,' you wrinkled-faced prune. Say 'Uncle' 'fore I smear yore nose round where yore ear oughta be."

But Art Teller was long past speech. Seeing which, Red got to his feet, wound his fingers in the over-long hair of Art Teller and dragged him out through the barroom

into the middle of the street, where he left him to squirm feebly in the manner of the slimy slug when the day is chilly.

Red returned to the barroom — the back room had served its purpose — stood in the middle of the floor and wiped his perspiring face.

"Has that gent any friends?" he asked gravely, looking at Dick Stratton, and jerking a thumb streetwards.

"Some," said Dick, his eyes narrowing.

"Not that I giveadam," Red continued easily, "only if one of them friends wants to tell that Teller gent he can have anythin' he wants of me by sendin' word to the hotel, I'd take it as a favor. O' course, if the jigger wants to let the deal drop, fine an' dandy, but I was just thinkin' he might feel I'd abused him or somethin'. You know how touchy some gents are — always lookin' for trouble thataway."

It was wonderful how exercise had sobered Red Kane. There was a dancing demon in his eye, but there was no hint of slurring thickness in his voice.

"I'd like to accommodate Teller," he went on. "I was aimin' to leave town tomorrow mornin' early, but I'll lay over another day so's to give him alla time he wants. Six-shooter, rifle, or knife — he can take his pick. I'm a li'l out o' practice with the six-shooter, still — "

He broke off abruptly and went out again into the street.

He stood upon the sidewalk, all the folk from Rouse's Rest clustering at his back, and looked reflectively at Art Teller where he lay prostrate in the dust, surrounded by seven or eight men. One of the men was holding Teller's head on his knee. This man wore a marshal's star. Tom Kane, leaning with every appearance of unconcern against the wall of the saloon, swore inwardly. Red would surely pull the marshal in. Tom felt it in his

bones. This thing was going to wind up in the smoke, and quickly too. Tom rested the palm of one hand on the butt of the gun on his leg and hooked the thumb of the other hand into his waistband. For, between that waistband and his shirt, an extra six-shooter nudged his hipbone.

Red folded his arms and stared hard at the marshal. He noted the latter's bulbous nose and slack mouth and was glad. Not that he would have been unwilling to face a man with a stronger fighting face, but he welcomed anything however trivial, that would make his task easier.

"Might 'a' knowed it," he said to himself. "In a townful o' bad actors the marshal is always a weak sister."

Red shuffled his feet and whistled a few bars of "Old Dan Tucker." This to call attention to himself. He succeeded.

The marshal laid down Teller's head and stood up. But it was not he who left the group and walked toward Rouse's Rest. It was another man, a heavy-set citizen with bulgy, square-cornered jowls and vicious little eyes set deep in his head, who rolled like a sailor as he stepped along. A stride from the sidewalk he halted.

"Who done that?" he demanded of the multitude at large, with a backward jerk of the head toward the man in the street.

"Talkin' to me?" inquired Red softly.

"If you done that, I am," declared the heavy-set man in a tone louder than seemed necessary.

"An' s'posin' I did," suggested Red in an even softer voice. "You wouldn't hurt a li'l feller like me, would yuh?"

"Did you whang up Art Teller thataway?" cried the man.

"What makes yuh think I did?" Red smiled disarmingly.

He was aware of a shuffling in his rear. The crowd

was withdrawing from his electric vicinity. It was using celerity too. Tom alone remained, his eyes roaming everywhere. Of what went on in the neighborhood of Rouse's Rest he missed nothing at all.

The heavy-set man looked at Red a moment. Red looked at him. The heavy-set man made a sudden movement. So did Red. A derringer barked twice. Gray smoke enveloped the heavy-set man — he had halted not four feet from Red. A dropped six-shooter hit the earth with a solid chunk. The heavy-set man sat down suddenly and groaned aloud. One derringer bullet had shattered his right elbow, the other had torn through his right forearm.

Red stood quietly, thin lines of smoke spiraling upward from the twin muzzles of the derringer balanced in his left hand. His other hand lay flat against the butt of his six-shooter.

"Y'all seen it, gents," said he, sidling back to the wall of the saloon. "It was a even break."

"Well —" began the marshal doubtfully.

"Don't say it," cut in a harsh voice from a neighboring doorway. "You ain't ready to die yet, you misguided fool!"

From the doorway stepped down the tall, lean, horse-faced citizen with the high beaver hat. He went out into the street, halted a few paces from where Red stood, tucked both hands beneath his coattails and gave the assembly of Flipup's inhabitants the benefit of his intense stare.

"It's just as this gent says," he went on, turning his head toward Red an instant. "It was a even break. I seen it. Y'all seen it. It was a even break, wasn't it, Marshal?"

There was a sublime contempt, a mordant sarcasm in the tone accompanying the question. Red wondered why. Later he learned why.

"Shore was an even break," the marshal made haste to reply.

The lean citizen nodded, worked his jaws squirrel-wise a moment and then accurately wet down a rock ten feet distant with a stream of tobacco juice. He strode briskly to where the heavy-set man was being ministered to by a couple of friends and stopped in front of him and peered at him malevolently.

"Yo're a fine piece o' work," Red heard him say. "A fi-ine lump o' gullion."

"I — I —" began the heavy-set man, backing off.

"Shut up," ordered the lean citizen. "Yo're through — understand. Yo're through."

The lean citizen turned his back on the heavy-set man and walked out to where Art Teller was at last being assisted to his wobbly feet. Disregarding the men that held Art up, the lean citizen hunched a shoulder, swung an arm and knocked Art Teller sprawling. Not content with the simple blow, he needs must kick Art Teller in the ribs.

"Yo're another ring-tail roarer," observed the lean citizen, dealing his victim another kick. "A real howler, ain't you, just like 'Square-Face' Higby? Reg'lar pair o' bad men, ain't yuh? Yuh make me sick."

He kicked Art once more for good measure and crossed to the sidewalk in front of Rouse's Rest.

"Stranger," he said to Red with a peculiarly mirthless smile, "I dunno yore name, but I like yore style. Some time, when yuh ain't got nothin' better to do, come see me. Maybe we can talk business. I'm called Bradley Usher."

He nodded in a manner to include Tom and walked rapidly away.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

SMOOTHER THAN BUTTER

"You idjit!" snarled Tom when he and his brother had withdrawn to the comparative privacy of the corral, there to busy themselves ostensibly with the feet of their horses. "What did yuh have to go wallopin' that Teller sharp for?"

"You didn't notice when he was in that game with us he'd lost the second button off his shirt, did yuh?"

"No, I didn't."

"Where was yore eyes? Well, anyway, he'd lost her, an', when he slouched down in his chair, the shirt bulged a li'l bit an' I could see right through all the way, 'cause his undershirt didn't have no buttons on it a-tall."

"What of it? Can't a gent go shy his buttons without you crawlin' his hump thataway? I'd 'a' guessed you was drunk, only I knowed you hadn't had enough to razzle a flea. What was the matter with you? Was you crazy?"

"Shore I was — crazy like a fox. If you'd had eyes in yore head instead of a couple of dried raisins — which they might be for all the good they do yuh — you'd 'a' took notice when Teller's shirt bulged — she only done it once — of a ring he had hangin' round his neck by a piece of string. That ring was a gold ring with three diamonds. What kind o' ring was it Dot Lenton said her Uncle Dick owned which it turned up missin' along with Uncle Dick's share of the money?"

"Oh," muttered Tom, making believe to adjust a hackamore that did not fit. "I see. Well?"

"I got the ring."

"You got the ring!"

"Shore, in my pants pocket. I took it off him while I was makin' such a show o' chokin' him. Lordy, I was in a sweat! The string was stout, an' I shore had a job to bust her without folks catchin' on. Tom, didn't you guess somethin' was up when I said we'd have to deal that hand over?"

"I didn't think nothin' o' that so much — yo're always playin' the fool thataway, but I shore felt like scratchin' my head when you pushed the table down on him an' wrastled him round instead o' shootin' him. I didn't understand that — it was dangerous. You was takin' too big a chance, at that. You could 'a' worked it the same way with a gun."

"Maybe, maybe not. But I didn't wanna use no gun. I don't want no bullet —— leastways not if I can help it — in Art Teller. Unventilated, we might be able to use him."

"How?"

"Thisaway — Here comes somebody."

The somebody was horse-faced Mr. Usher. He approached them, picking his way daintily among the horses in the corral, his high hat on the back of his head, his hands in the pockets of his trousers. There was something almost feminine in the way he placed his feet. When he chose, he could step lightly. In another this would have been ludicrous, but it was not in Mr. Bradley Usher. For it was the lightness and the femininity of the hungry beast of prey.

He nodded civilly to Red and Tom, spread his legs and critically regarded the two horses they were tending.

"Wanna sell that black, stranger?" he said to Red. "The one with the white stockin' in the corner there?"

"I might," was the grave response, "if I owned him."

"I heard you had a good-lookin' black."

The intense gaze met Red's eye and steadied to a straight stare.

"You heard right," confirmed Red. "I got a good-lookin' black. But the accordeen with the white stockin' ain't him. Yonder he stands — him with the Cross Eight brand."

He indicated his own black pony where it stood dozing on three legs.

"I *heard* he was a good-lookin' hoss," grumbled Mr. Usher.

"He is."

"I don't think much of him." Bluntly.

"You don't have to — not ownin' him."

"No — not ownin' him I don't. I don't — not ownin' him."

Red strove to pierce the blank intensity of those strange eyes to what lay behind. But this he could not do. Mr. Usher's wide, thin-lipped mouth stretched into a toothful smile.

"No," said Red, "not ownin' him like you say, it don't matter what you think, do it?"

"That is a question." Mr. Usher nodded an oracular head. "That —— is — a question. Sometimes what I think matters a lot. It depends."

"Yeah," drawled Red, "I guess so."

Again the toothful, wholly mirthless smile.

"I'll be in my office at seven," said Mr. Usher. "I'll be glad to see both of yuh. Maybe yuh'll hear somethin' to yore advantage if yuh come in."

Mr. Usher nodded abruptly and departed, coat-tails flapping. It was noticeable that now he did not pick his way. He strode along as one who plainly sees his goal. Doubtless he did see it. For the Mr. Ushers of this wicked world are a sanguine breed of folk.

"I ain't none shore about that cheerful lookin' buzzard." Tom wagged a pessimistic head.

"We're gonna go see him alla same," Red declared with finality.

"Oh, shore, we gotta, but —"

"We got eyes, ain't we? We got our guns, an' —"

"Hell's bells, that don't worry me! He knows somethin', that long-reached stepladder does. An' what is it? That's what I wanna know. What is it?"

"We'll find out. There goes the hotel dish pan. C'mon. I'm hungry."

At half-past seven — they did not wish to appear too anxious — they pushed open the door of Mr. Usher's office and entered. In a chair behind a table, his heels resting on the table, his hands clasped behind his head, sat Mr. Usher. He was still wearing his high hat.

"Take chairs, gents," he invited without budging. "They's cigars in that box. Help yoreselves."

They took the chairs but not the cigars. They had no mind to smoke at Mr. Usher's expense. They rolled cigarettes instead and looked about them. It was an ascetically furnished place of business, this office. A great safe in the corner, a table, four chairs — nothing more. Not even a calendar hung upon the wall.

"Nice evenin'," observed Mr. Usher.

"Shore," assented Red.

"Kind o' hot," qualified Mr. Usher, jack-knifing his long body out of the chair and going to the window.

"Hot is right. I s'pose now that's why yo're closin' the window."

Mr. Usher tidily placed the window prop on top of the sash, and turned.

"I enjoy a stuffy room," he said and removed his high hat and went through the process of obtaining a chew of tobacco. It was evident that the operation never varied in method. It might almost have been a rite.

When the hat was back on his head and his jaws were working over the lump in his cheek, he went to the door

and bolted it with an iron bolt a yard long and half as thick as a man's wrist.

"Might's well go where we can talk," said he and opened a door in the back of the room.

This door gave ingress to Usher's warehouse — a huge room filled with all manner of merchandise. There were cases of whisky and brandy, barrels of china, crates of tinware, saddles — riding and pack, old and new — straddled racks from which depended bridles and heavy freighting harness in all degrees of repair. There were wheelbarrows, whole companies of miners' shovels, picks and drills. Part of one side was stacked to the roof with cases, some stenciled "Blankets — Bed", others marked "Blankets — Saddle." Next to these cases were seven wide mirrors of the type made and provided for the saloon trade. Cuddling the mirrors was a cookstove upon which were aligned three copper washboilers. Between the cookstove and three knocked-down wooden beds and their rolled mattresses was a child's cradle. It was manifest that Mr. Usher's sign told the truth.

Through this fantastic agglomeration of commercial articles Mr. Usher led the way to the opposite end of the warehouse. Here a corner had been partitioned off into a room some fifteen feet square.

This room was as slimly furnished as the office. There was a bed, the blankets tumbled, two chairs, a home-made desk covered with a red-chestnut horsehide, and a washstand contrived of a packing-case, provided with a bucket of water, an agateware basin, a yellow bar of laundry soap and a towel that had at a date long past been white. A bracketed shelf nailed to the wall above the washstand held sundry pint and quart bottles, and a can or two. One of the quart bottles, the only one wrapped in paper, stood dangerously near the edge of the shelf.

Mr. Usher waved his guests to the chairs and seated himself on one end of the packing-case washstand. He

crossed one leg over the other and clasped his long-fingered hands round a bony knee.

Red hooked his thumbs in the armholes of his vest, teetered back on the rear legs of his chair and stared up at the skylights all dusty-golden in the rays of the slanting sun. He dropped his eyes to Usher's level. The latter seemed lost in thought. His jaws were working very slowly. He was looking intently at a crack in the floor.

Red's gaze, wandering past the money-lender, skimmed the top of the desk, rested indifferently on a letter file armed with a naked eight-inch spike, passed on and passed over a small but exceedingly interesting object a foot beyond the file.

Red unhooked a thumb, raised his hand and slowly scratched an ear. This necessitated the turning of his head somewhat and allowed him to scrutinize in the most natural manner the small object in the neighborhood of the file.

This small object was the head, beautifully carved in wood, of an Indian girl. Complete in every detail, this head, while at least three times larger, bore an amazing resemblance to the head Red had seen in the possession of Bill Derr.

Feature for feature the heads were the same, the man who carved them had had the same picture in his mind in both instances as he whittled and cut — and he had been the same man. On that point there could be no doubt.

John Hudson, the desired of the law, had again popped his head above the surface of the sea of oblivion into which he had sunk when Bill Derr failed to identify him in the person of Ben Lenton.

Red ceased scratching his ear, slumped down in his chair and sleepily lowered his eyelids. What connection could there be between Bradley Usher and John Hudson?

Perhaps that rat hole was empty. Mr. Usher might have come by the head quite innocently. It was a toss-up. Red did not know what to think.

"Did yuh know," Mr. Usher began abruptly to Red's address, "that you put the kibosh on two o' my best men?"

"That's tough luck — for them," answered Red, rousing and stiffening.

"Ain't it?" Dryly. "Yuh see," Mr. Usher continued after a moment, "losin' two men thataway sort o' puts me in a hole."

"Yeah? Well, yuh got my sympathy. But I don't guess they're as bad hurt as you think. Art Teller's only bruised a lot, unless you caved in his slats yoreself when yuh kicked him. An' that Square Face boy has only got a couple of holes in his arm. Give him a month, an' he'll be all so fine an' dandy. Anyway, why bellyache to me?"

"When yuh know me better, Stranger," was the unmoved response, "yuh'll find out I never bellyache, not never nohow. Square Face'll never use that arm again, leastaways for gun-fightin' he won't. Doc Alton says she'll be stiff till he cashes. But that ain't what's botherin' me. It's their nerve. They've been licked, the both of 'em, an' licked good — Art special. From now on they won't have the guts they had before. Square Face showed he wouldn't stand the acid right after he was shot. Yesterday I couldn't 'a' talked to him like I did without a battle. To-day he quit cold. An' I'm gamblin' Art Teller will be even more meachin'.

"Them two sports you run yore brand on was a heap useful to me. I didn't keep 'em so busy they didn't have time to enjoy 'emselves none, but, when they was workin', they chawed up sixty minutes every hour. I need two men in their places."

Mr. Usher paused, disentangled the hands clasped on

his knee and closely examined his finger nails. The inspection proving satisfactory, he reclasped his hands and looked at Red and his brother.

"Meanin'?" inquired Red.

"She's yore move."

"I ain't played checkers for so long I most forgot how — but s'pose now we don't wanna move?"

"I pay one hundred a month an' keep at the hotel."

"I guess maybe the work ain't punchin' cows."

"Not so yuh could notice."

"Just what might it be?" asked Tom flatly.

"Obeyin' orders."

"Oh, yeah," said Red, "that's fine, but we gotta know what yo're figgerin' on us doin' so's to earn a hundred a month."

"Ain't you kind o' partic'lar?"

"Depends on where yuh happen to be sittin'. From here we ain't a bit partic'lar."

"Maybe, but I still think yo're kind o' partic'lar alla same — kind o' partic'lar for folks ownin' three hair-branded hosses."

Red leaned back in his chair and slapped his leg and laughed and laughed and laughed again. So likewise did Tom, but not so loudly.

"Y'old fox!" exclaimed Red when he could speak. "Might 'a' knowed we couldn't fool you! Yuh gotta admit that hair-brandin' was shore one work of art."

"All o' that," nodded Mr. Usher. "It would look right good to most people, but my eyes are pretty sharp — pretty sharp. I don't know what yore business is, an' I don't wanna know — keep right on with yore fairy tale o' sellin' a ranch — an' — "

"You must 'a' been talkin' to Cockeye or that Stratton gent," Red interrupted accusingly.

"They was talkin' to me. What difference does it make?"

"None a-tall. We're all li'l friends together. Oh, yes, indeedy. An' we didn't sell no ranch, huh? You hear that, Tom?"

"She must be true," grinned Tom. "The gent says so himself."

"Yeah, well, as the gent was just gonna say, here's two jobs open for two partic'lar gents to wrastle with while they're waitin' to sell another ranch. One hundred a month apiece, keep an' pickin's. All you gotta do, if yo're still so set on knowin' beforehand, is look out after my interests. I got several."

"I noticed that," said Red.

"Yore eyes are most as good as mine an' lookin' out after my interests will shore keep 'em good. In my business yuh can easy see how me an' other gents mightn't always hit it off. Most folks is stubborn as mules an' can only see one side of a argument. An' they gotta be showed. It ain't always convenient for me to do the showin'. I gotta spend most o' my time right here in town or at the Empire. I can't be ridin' the range alla time collectin' what's owin' me."

"An' we're to do the collectin', huh?" Red smiled broadly.

"You'll see that it's done," Mr. Usher replied ambiguously, "an' you'll keep me from bein' gouged out o' my rights by slick fellers with rough corners. O' course, yuh can't always skin a two-legged calf without killin' him."

"As a rule yuh can't," admitted Red.

"Yuh get the idea. Get this one: I don't wanna see no two-legged calves downed unless she's necessary, an' you'll be the judge o' what's necessary, but any time yuh gotta beef one you get one hundred dollars bonus."

"Apiece — no matter who does the killin'?"

The callous devil nodded. Red did not dare look at his brother. He rolled his eyes upward and puckered his lips and whistled a nameless tune.

"Oughta be more," said Red suddenly. "This here's a new layout for us, an' —"

"Say one hundred an' a quarter apiece," chipped in Tom.

"That's only two fifty per calf," said Red. "Dirt cheap."

Mr. Usher chewed awhile in silence. Finally he nodded.

"All right," said he, "I'll go yuh. What may I call you gents? . . . Red Carey an' Tom Carey? Brothers, huh? An' that ranch yuh sold — where did yuh say it was?"

"We didn't say," smiled Red.

"My mistake. I thought yuh did. It don't matter — not a-tall. But that Cross Eight black pony is sort of interestin', kind o'. That might 'a' been the Bar S brand at one time."

"Meanin'?"

Red's tone was cold as a blizzard. His eyes were colder.

Tom's chair creaked as the sitter moved ever so slightly.

"No offense, gents," Mr. Usher said calmly. "But if that Cross Eight pony was ever a Bar S hoss — yuh needn't go huntin' for nothin' hostyle in them words, 'cause nothin's meant — I'm only thinkin' yuh can tell me somethin', maybe."

"Then come to the point," Red advised him sharply. "No need to travel ten miles to go two."

"Have you lately been in Fort Creek County in —" Here he named the territory.

"We might."

"Might you have been by any chance in a town called Farewell?"

"We might 'a' been there too."

"Might you have cut the trail anywhere o' three gents

— a sheriff named Lumley, an' his two deputies, Billy Bruff an' Dunc Rouse?"

"We might 'a' done that. We ain't partic'lar what we look at. Sheriffs, deputies, marshals — they all look alike to us." The sardonic devil in Red's gray eyes leaped and danced and made merry. "Shore we seen 'em — them three you mean. An' I'll say I never saw gents so out o' luck in all my luck."

"Out o' luck?"

"Yeah — gamblin'. The sheriff, Lumley, bucked the wheel one night an' quit six thousand loser. Tried to win her back the next night an' dropped three. Went to it again, an' inside o' one li'l hour he went shy a thousand odd an' quit broke. He never played no more after that. But the other two, they played. I guess yes. I've seen gamblin' men, but them two could give any gamblers I ever seen the first bite an' win with one hand tied. Mornin', noon an' night — draw, stud, blackjack, faro, roulette, anythin'. They'd even chuck dice for a change.

"They didn't lose so much as the sheriff — thousand or fifteen hundred apiece maybe. They was still hard at it when we left town. Seemed to be well fixed for cash."

Mr. Usher's expression as Red unfolded this sordid tale did not change. But the knuckles of the hands gripped round his knee were bloodless when Red stopped speaking.

"They went north to bring back a murderer who had settled near Farewell," remarked Mr. Usher quietly. "Did they catch him?"

"Aw, you mean Lorimer, out there by Sweetwater Mountain. We heard about that. Shore was a joke on them fellers. They arrested him all right, but he got away while they was bringin' him to Farewell. Hell's bells, I dunno what was the matter with 'em. Three gents all organized with six-shooters an' Winchesters, an'

the prisoner drags it easy as yuh please. I'll bet if Jake Rule or his deputy, Kansas Casey, had been along, he wouldn't 'a' made it, not by a jugful. I ain't got no special cause to be friendly with either Sheriff Rule or Kansas, but I'll say this for 'em — they don't lose no prisoners."

"Didn't they try to catch Lenton — Lenton's his name here?"

"Aw, they tried," drawled Red, contempt rampant in his tone. "But you don't catch no prisoners playin' the wheel."

"They was out with a posse two or three days, I heard," contributed Tom, fearful that Red was coming it a bit thick.

"Yeah, an' rode the range to the south an' east — just where he wouldn't go. Too many ranches thataway. Northwest now — that's where they should 'a' gone. Take it from me, Lorimer — or Lenton — rode northwest or north. Maybe he went as far north as the Dog-soldier or Paradise Bend. Once you let him get in the Gov'ment Hills, yuh might as well wave yore hat good-by. Yuh'll never see him again."

"Maybe he headed for the Three Sisters," suggested Mr. Usher.

"He might," admitted Red. "Yuh never can tell."

"Was it before or after the arrest an' escape o' Lenton that Lumley an' his two friends began to gamble?" Thus Mr. Usher staring at Red.

"After," was the prompt reply. "Leastaways, if they gambled before, we didn't hear about it."

"I see," murmured Mr. Usher. "I see."

He rose to his feet, yawning widely, and stretched with much standing on tiptoe and twisting of long-muscled arms. One arm in its sweep jogged the paper-wrapped quart bottle which stood near the edge of the shelf above the washstand. The bottle tottered to a fall. Mr.

Usher, reaching quickly to save it, misjudged his distance, smacked it with his knuckles and sent it spinning across the room to smash itself to bits upon the red-chestnut horsehide that covered the desk.

"——," remarked Mr. Usher, tearing the back from a writing-pad and brushing up the sopping mess of torn paper and broken glass. "I guess that'll be all for now, gents. S'pose you come see me in the mornin'. I may have a li'l jag o' work for yuh."

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

A CHECK

"Say, Red," whispered Tom in Red's ear, "you've done took too big a chance. You've sp'iled the deal, I tell yuh. S'pose they write back here an' tell him just how Ben Lenton did make his escape? S'pose they do, huh?"

"They won't," returned the serene Red. "They dassent. How'd they look tellin' how they was held up an' handcuffed an' the window sash dropped on their necks? Shore, I know they got a long tale of a gang an' all, but at that the way they acted don't show up none too well. You see what Usher's like, don't yuh? He wants action, not excuses. Do yuh think they're gonna hand him any excuses? They are not. They'll keep what's happened under their hats awhile, y'bet yuh."

"Maybe yo're right. Once in a year or two yuh are. That notion o' tellin' about them three sports gamblin' was slam-up bright. Just what I was gonna tell him myself if you hadn't."

"You couldn't 'a' worked out a idea like that in a million years. Notice how he swallowed it? Easy — well, I'd tell folks so."

"Will it start Usher north? That's the next card in the pack."

"I dunno, but it'll start business a-movin'. Usher ain't the gent to sit still an' suck his thumbs when he's bein' razzledazzled. Nawsir, not that long-legged stepladder. Give him time to think it out an' get it sot in his mind that Ben Lenton gave them three jiggers the thirty thousand

to be let off, an' things are gonna move, you hear me whistlin'. An', when they do get a-boilin' good, it'll be a shame, if you'n me with our li'l spoons can't skim somethin' off the top."

"It'll be worse'n a shame. We'd deserve lynchin'. I wonder what he takes us for — hoss thieves?"

"An' road agents most like. He thinks we're bad as him, anyway. Gawd, what a stinkin' polecat he is! Makes yuh wanna spit every time yuh look at him."

"One thing, he wouldn't renig at killin' Dick Lenton, that's a cinch."

"He wouldn't renig at nothin' so it was low-down, the skunk. Notice anythin' partic'lar on that desk of his, Tom — over beyond the letter file?"

"From where I was sittin' them long knees of his was in the way. What was it? . . . Huh? A Injun head like what Bill Derr had? That's — shore — a odd number."

"Ain't it?"

"What's it mean?"

"It don't mean nothin' good, an' yuh can stick a pin in that."

"I'm gonna go stick my head on a piller. C'mon."

"Not me. I gotta stay right here so's I can watch the corral where Mister Art Teller keeps his hoss. I wanna whisper somethin' in his ear before he leaves our middlin' midst."

"I s'pose he will be slidin' out," said Tom thoughtfully.

"Soon's he can, y'bet yuh. He ain't a complete fool. Lookit! that's him now."

Faintly visible in the semi-darkness, the figure of a limping man approached the corral gate. The man was dragging a saddle. They could hear the leather squeaking.

The man opened the gate, passed in and pulled it to

behind him. Sounded then a scurrying and a plunging within the corral. The startled horses were enlivening the occasion. A rope slapped against the posts. The man had missed his cast.

"Hear him cuss," whispered Red in delight. "He's friend Art all right."

Ten minutes later Teller, leading a saddled horse, issued from the corral gateway. Turning round from fastening the gate, his peace of mind was rudely disturbed by a prodding at his ribs. Art Teller, his biceps cuddling his ears, went painfully stiff on the instant. He knew a gun muzzle when he felt one.

"Le's go where we can talk," invited the voice of the man who had beaten him.

Art Teller was moved to accept, if not gladly, at least with alacrity.

"I'll just take yore gun," whispered Tom and took it, carefully patting the captive from knees to neck in search of a possible hide-out.

Within ten minutes Art Teller was squatting on the ground under a cottonwood tree a quarter-mile out of Flipup. Facing him Red and Tom sat on their heels. Tom held the reins of Art's horse.

"Why you leavin' town?" asked Red.

"I got business," replied Art Teller sullenly.

"Shore, I know yuh got business. Everybody's got business. We got business, too. An' my business is findin' out where you got that three-diamond ring."

"So yo're the gent —" began Art Teller hotly, and stopped.

"I'm the gent took it off yore neck, if that's what yo're gettin' at, feller. That ring was stole from me six year ago over in Cheyenne, Wyoming, an' I wanna know where you got it."

"I didn't take it off o' you, anyhow," was the sulky reply.

"Maybe not. Where did yuh get it?"

"It was give to me."

"Who by?"

"A friend o' mine."

"What's his name?"

"He's got different names. S'pose I show yuh his picture. How'll that do?"

"If yo're thinkin' on gamblin' with us," said the suspicious Red, "think again."

"Not much I ain't," was the fervent declaration. "Picture's in my vest pocket with some letters. Here, feel for yourself."

Red felt.

"Yank her out," said he, satisfied.

Tom's six-shooter had been trained on Art Teller from the moment he sat down. Red, on the other hand, trailed his gun across his thigh, the barrel pointing at the ground. He reached up to his hatband for a match.

Although the starlight was bright, it was dark enough under the cottonwood. The dimly outlined Mr. Teller pulled a whitish packet from an inner vest pocket. The component parts of this packet he shuffled as one shuffles a pack of cards. Then he thumbed them over slowly.

He finally selected one and laid it on his knee and smoothed it flat with the palm of his hand.

"Here," he said an odd quiver in his voice. "Got a match?"

Red leaned forward and scratched the match. At the instant of its flaring alight, while his eyes were temporarily dazzled, Art Teller swung his right arm and struck Red a stinging smash on the cheek-bone. Red toppled over straightway against Tom, knocking the latter off his balance and sending his well-meant and better-aimed bullet wide by a yard.

For a citizen who had recently received a thundering manhandling Art Teller's exhibition of swift action was

marvelous. He was coming to his feet as he struck the blow at Red. He did not strike again but dived headlong for his reins, scooped them from the ground where Tom had dropped them, started his horse on the jump and swung up with the animal going full stretch.

Before Tom could fire again, the greatly chagrined Red drove the heel of his hand hard down on Tom's hammer-cocking thumb.

"Don't shoot!" he commanded. "Yuh might kill him."

"I was countin' on doin' that," rejoined his brother, angry and nonplussed. "Whatsa matter with yuh?"

"Nothin', but they's somethin' the matter with you, you squallin' idjit! We gotta find out somethin' from this gent; if he passes out, we can't."

"We can't anyway," Tom snarled bitterly. "Listen to them hoofs, will yuh? He'll be a mile away in a shake."

"Can't help it, Tom. I tell yuh we can't run no risk of downin' Mister Teller. So far he's the only gent we got any real evidence against. We'll find him again, don't yuh fret. Say, ain't I got a right to feel worse'n you do? It was my fault he got away. Hell's bells, Tom, you won't never catch no fish if yuh go on cussin' like that."

The following morning, while they were soaping their faces at the washbench outside the hotel kitchen door, two horsemen trotted past, heading toward the corral. Red, winking the soap from his smarting eyes, perceived with amazement that the elder of the two riders was Bill Derr,. the younger Bert Kinzie, one of the 88 punchers whom his brother Tom had perforated while playing even for his — Red's — wounding.

Red's gun and belt were hanging together with Tom's on a nail above the washbench. Red leaped. As his fingers closed on the friendly butt, he heard above the snap-

ping crackle of frying bacon in the kitchen a smack and a click at his back. Lord, the other man had beaten him to it!

But no shot followed. Even as he whirled to face whatever might betide, he heard Bill Derr saying quietly:

"I don't see nothin' to get hostyle for. I *say* I don't see *nothin'* to go on the prod about."

Red, his gun poised, saw that Bill Derr, crowding his horse against that of his companion, held Bert Kinzie's hand motionless on the butt of his half-drawn gun. Bert Kinzie's sunburnt face was set and drawn; the lips curled in a snarl, writhing away from the clenched teeth, the veins in his neck swelled as he strove with every atom of strength in his tight-muscled body to free his hand and gun.

Red, tensely immobile as a cat at a rat hole, waited. He could afford to wait. He held the other's life beneath the cocked hammer of his gun.

"Now, now," soothed Bill Derr in a low tone, "don't be a fool, Bert. Don't be a damfool. Don't yuh hear me sayin' they ain't nothin' to get hostyle about?"

"Do yuh want me —" furiously began the straining Kinzie.

"I want yuh to keep still," cut in Bill Derr. "Shore, I see what you see — see 'em plain, both of 'em. It's all right, I tell you, it's all right."

"But —"

"Who's runnin' this, Bert?" persisted the quiet voice. "You take my word for it that everythin's all right. If it ain't, I'll be the first one plugged. I'm between you an' him. Yo're sort o' behind me thataway, Bert. Sort o' usin' me for a breastwork like. No need to get het now, no need to get het. That's the stuff. Tuck yore artillery back in camp. Le's unsaddle. Good idea, huh?"

Bill Derr, taking care to keep his long body between his companion and that companion's enemies, pressed on

to the corral gate. Red dropped his gun hand at his side and glanced askance at his brother. Tom, soapy water dripping from his chin, held a towel in one hand and a six-shooter in the other. He turned a puzzled face toward Red. Behind them in the kitchen the breakfast bacon snapped and crackled.

"What's Bill drivin' at?" muttered Tom.

Red shook his head. Slowly he put away his gun. Tom followed his example. Red proceeded to finish his ablutions. Not so Tom Kane. The latter swiped the towel once across his wet features, slicked his hair flat with the palm of one hand, and put on his hat and cartridge belt without once removing his narrow-slitted eyes from the figures of Derr and Kinzie.

It was obvious that Bill Derr was still endeavoring to show Bert Kinzie the error of his ways. The latter, his back eloquent of sulkiness, listened in silence.

A few minutes later Derr and Kinzie, carrying their saddles, walked toward the side door of the hotel. Kinzie looked straight before him. Derr's washed-out gray eyes glanced at Red and Tom standing at the kitchen door and passed on to view the distant hills.

"We'd oughta get a good bunch at the Rafter O," Bill Derr was saying as he and Kinzie passed the brothers. "Startin' at nine, say, we'd oughta reach there by four o'clock. Yeah, at nine," he repeated, as if the silent Kinzie had asked a question. "We'll start at *nine* on the trail to the Rafter O."

The two men went in by the side door. Red looked up and down the dusty irregular stretch of ground between the rear elevations of the houses fronting on Main Street and the straggling row of corrals. At the other end of town a freighter was harnessing his mule teams. Three corrals nearer a woman was milking a nervous nanny-goat. But the freighter was too far away to have seen anything out of the ordinary, and the milker was not suffi-

ciently near to have heard a word, and furthermore her back was toward the hotel.

Red poked his head round the jamb of the kitchen doorway.

"How's breakfast comin'?" he asked in a conversational tone.

The sound of the frying bacon was so loud that he had to raise his voice and repeat the question before the cook heard him.

"He didn't hear nothin' outside, that's a cinch," Red told himself. "Of course, they's all them back windows, but she's pretty early, an' anyway a gent would have to see an' hear both to make anythin' out of it. Tom," he said aloud to his brother, who stood scratching his head, staring steadfastly at the side door of the hotel, "Tom, I guess you'n me won't go see Friend Bradley till after nine — some time after. Le's go in an' eat."

"Shore," assented Tom, and he licked his lips and saw to it that the extra gun behind the waistband of his trousers could be drawn easily.

It was an odd meal and a most uncomfortable one, that breakfast. Bert Kinzie and Tom Kane watched each other like weasels. Red Kane, despite his faith in Bill Derr and the latter's restraining influence over Bert Kinzie, hardly tasted what he ate and drank.

The hasher wondered why four of the guests manipulated their table cutlery with their left hands only. But she was newly come out of the Corn Belt where the law was revered as a fetish even in those days. The other breakfasters were too busy gobbling and guzzling to observe aught that lay beyond the rims of their finger-thick stoneware.

Bill Derr and Bert Kinzie finished before Red and Tom and kicked back their chairs and withdrew to the street. Red piled his plate, saucer and cup with a heartsome feeling of relief, retrieved his hat from beneath his chair and

twirled it upon the point of a stiff forefinger. The landlord slouched in from the kitchen to help the hasher clear away. Red fixed him with a hard eye and hummed:

"We'll hang old Santa Anna soon —
Wa-hoo! Wa-hoo!
An' all the Greaser soldiers too,
To the tune o' Yankee Doodle Doo,
'Way down in Mexico."

The landlord glanced askance at Red and brushed against him as he passed. His head gave a slight jerk forward. He stacked a dozen plates and saucers and shuffled back to the kitchen.

"Old Rough an' Ready, he's a trump."

sang Red, swinging full stride into the air.

"Wa-hoo! Wa-hoo!
He'll rub old Santa Anna out
An' drive the Greasers in a rout,
'Way down in Mexico."

Tom shoved back his chair. Red trod upon his brother's toe and started toward the kitchen. Tom followed. They found the landlord awaiting them outdoors by the washbench. He grinned at them with all the confidence in the world. They did not return the grin. Somehow Red was reminded of a sleek cod head he had once seen in an advertisement.

"The cod's eyes popped more," remarked Red thoughtfully, solemnly contemplating the landlord.

"Huh?" gawked the landlord uncertainly, his grin fading.

"Nothin'," was the reply. "Yuh wouldn't understand. Whadda yuh want?"

"Did yuh ever see that tall feller with the gray eyes be-

fore?" asked the landlord, looking a trifle dashed. "The oldest one o' them two just got in, I mean?"

"Now hownell do yuh expect me to know all the fly-by-nights in the country?" demanded Red rudely. "I ain't no cyclophobia."

"Yuh dunno him then?"

"Ain't I just said I didn't?"

"All right, all right, I was only a-askin'. No offense meant. Dunno what yuh gettin' hot for. Brad Usher said to me last night —"

"Nemmine what he said," interrupted Red. "If he was talkin' to you last night, then I guess you an' us understand each other without havin' to chat about it. Whyfor is this tall feller worryin' yuh?"

"He ain't — exactly. But I seen him before some'ers."

"What o' that?"

Red stared at the landlord. What was going on behind that mask of sleek and oily features? Was there more than a surface meaning to what the man was saying? Had he witnessed the incident of the early morning?

"What o' that?" Red repeated.

"Nothin', only I can't remember where I seen him."

"An' what o' that too? You talk like an old woman."

The landlord, whose name was Skinner, wagged a dogged head.

"I tell yuh I don't like it," he insisted. "I seen that feller some'ers. I can't remember where or how, but I'm bettin' he's a United States Marshal or a detective or somethin'."

"How about the other feller? Is he a detective, too?"

"I dunno. I know I never seen him before."

"If they're detectives, whadda yuh think they're doin' here? Ain't Flipup a model Sunday-school or what?"

"Yo're friends with Brad Usher same as I am," was the careful answer. "Flipup is Flipup, an' we don't

want no sneaks lally-gaggin' round stickin' in their noses where they ain't wanted. An' — we — ain't — gonna have 'em."

"Tell yuh what," suggested Red, "s'pose now you just slide up to one o' them fellers, the tallest one for choice, an' call him a sneak. I'll bet he wouldn't do nothin' more'n take off his hat to yuh. He might even say 'Thank yuh.' You can't never tell. Take a chance, feller, take a chance."

But the stocky landlord was not taking any chances that morning. He retired to the kitchen without another word.

Red and Tom, grinning from ear to ear because they did not feel in the least joyful, went in to get their saddles.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

THE STAIN

"KIND o' thought you'd take the hint if I talked loud enough," said Bill Derr checking his horse and looking over a cutbank bordering the trail to the Rafter O.

"Yeah," smiled Red, sitting his horse under the cutbank, "takin' hints is where we live, Tom an' me. How about yore friend Bert behind yuh there? Is he —"

His smile broadened as he left the sentence unfinished.

Bert Kinzie glanced at Tom Kane where he stood motionless at his horse's head.

"We-ell," began Bert hesitatingly, and then stopped as Bill Derr hurriedly cut in with: "I told Bert, Tom, just as I'm a-tellin' you now, that pursuin' this feud o' yores to the bitter end is all foolishness. Bert's got yore trademark on him in two places, an' I notice they's a scar alongside yore head you didn't get shavin'. She's a standoff thataway, an' both gents deserve great credit. Besides, fellers in the same line o' business hadn't oughta quarrel nohow. If they do, the business bogs down quick an' soon; so —"

"Same line o' business," interrupted Tom, his features immobile. "How yuh mean?"

"I got a idea yo're down here after what we're after."

"Huh?"

"The road agents."

"The road agents?"

"Shore. The company hired me to go get 'em. They's a reward too, an' the 88's offerin' one for their

money so Bert Kinzie come along to help on that. Ain't you a-tryin' to see what you can do on yore own hook?"

"We're always glad to make an honest dollar," equivocated Red with a leer. "But what have the road agents gotta do with Flipup, Colorado?"

Before Bill Derr could reply, came the faint report of a rifle, and Bert Kinzie's horse, scored across the rump by a bullet, jumped straight over the cutbank. It was purely fortuitous that Tom Kane stood directly in its path.

Tom leaped aside, but the horse's shoulder caught him in mid-air and knocked him spinning. The horse crossed its legs and fell. Bert Kinzie shot over the saddle-horn and landed on all fours. He scrambled to his feet just in time to seize his potential enemy by the collar and drag him beyond leg-sweep of the stung and frantic animal. As it was, a flying hind hoof whisked Tom's hat from his head.

Tom sat up, supporting himself on two shaky arms, and blinked at Bert Kinzie, who had sprung back to his pony, and was dragging it to its agitated feet. Tom rubbed a slightly dazed head and looked from Bert Kinzie to those furiously kicking hoofs. Slowly he got to his feet, retrieved his hat and walked up to Bert Kinzie and tapped him on the shoulder. Bert seized his reins short and turned to find Tom holding out a most amicable hand.

"Shake," said Tom. "I don't cut down on you no more, an' you can gamble on that."

"Which shore goes double," Bert declared instantly, and he heartily shook Tom's hand.

"Set 'em up in the other alley!" bawled Red, who was holding Tom's thoroughly frightened horse and having a time with it. "Come an' get this locoed pinwheel o' yores before I bust his jaw for him, will yuh, Tom? Where's Bill?"

Bill Derr was nowhere in sight. He had vanished like a handful of smoke on a windy day. But five minutes later he appeared at the mouth of a draw a hundred yards away and waved them to come to him.

"If we slide down this draw," said he, when they loped up, "we'll be out o' sight complete o' that sharpshooter."

"Where's he shootin' from?" asked Red, wheeling his horse. "That hill over yonder?"

"That hill," replied Bill Derr, leading the way at a gallop. "An' they's two of him."

"Two!"

"Two, y'bet yuh. Didn't you hear the shootin'?"

"Not after the first shot. We was too busy with that fool hoss o' Bert's to hear anythin'."

"Well, they's two o' them bummers all right. I counted six puffs o' smoke from two different places while I was ridin' along the top o' that cutbank huntin' for a low break, an' I'll bet I rode a mile before I found one."

"You might 'a' jumped it. Bert did."

"If I'd had his reason, I might 'a'."

Bill Derr glanced at Bert and Tom where they rode side by side and permitted himself a very slight smile. But he made no comment. He knew when to let well enough alone.

"Ain't this draw leadin' toward that hill?"

Red squinted up at the sun to get his direction.

"West of it, I guess," answered Bill Derr. "Maybe, if we work round behind 'em, we can give 'em a surprise."

"I'm willin'. I guess now that landlord must 'a' remembered where he met yuh."

"Huh? Whadda yuh mean? That landlord party wasn't in Flipup when I was here five years ago."

Red explained the allusion, and Bill Derr swore.

"That's what comes of bein' famous," said Red, his

tongue in his cheek. "An' I won't go there to please any long-legged cow-wrastler, neither! You got yore nerve, to come pryin' round after our road agents!"

"Yore road agents!"

"Shore, ours. We was here first, wasn't we? Finders keepers. That's us."

"You ain't found 'em yet, I guess."

"What makes yuh think they're here?" Red abruptly switched to a new angle of the subject.

"I don't think. I know."

Bill Derr winked at Red and turned into a dry wash that gave promise of leading to the rear of the bushwhackers' hill.

"Yuh know, huh?" gibed Red. "That's shore bright of yuh. Yo're packin' so much wisdom these days le's hear their names an' all."

"That's tellin'."

"Yeah, yuh bet it is, old-timer."

"What you two row-wowin' about?" Bert Kinzie in the rear wished to know.

"Bill thinks he knows more'n I do," replied Red Kane. "Yonder's a real nice thick wood," he added, looking ahead and to the right, "full o' real nice thick spruce, an' I only wish they was thicker."

"We'd oughta be able to injun up on them bushwhackers now," hazarded Tom, squinting at the feather-topped mass of foliage lifting above the right-hand bank of the wash.

"Here!" cried Red by way of comment and turned his horse at the bank.

Outblown nostrils showing velvet-red, the spatting quirts lacing their shrinking bellies, the wild-eyed ponies clawed their humpbacked way up the stiffish slope and scrambled over the top. They got into their stride in two jumps and pelted in and out among the spruce trees at a smart burst of speed.

Within five minutes their riders, dismounted, were reconnoitering the hill from the edge of the wood.

"They've sloped," remarked Red, eying the barebacked hill with huge disgust. "They've sloped."

"Maybe they've gone over other side of the hill," suggested Tom, not overlooking an opportunity to disagree with his brother. "Maybe yuh can't see where — "

"Aw, whatsa matter with yuh?" demanded Red. "Hill's smooth as a naked toad, 'ceptin' where them few bushes is on top, an' they ain't high enough to hide a hoss. They've done gone, I tell yuh."

"Yeah," corroborated Bill Derr, who was standing up, "they've slid out. Yonder they go." He pointed a lean brown finger northward. "What'd I tell yuh?" he added in quiet triumph. "I said they was two."

The two black specks slid up the flank of a swell four miles away and vanished behind the crest.

"They must 'a' been scared of yuh, Bill," Red observed with a certain grimness.

"I guess," said Bill Derr, sadly notching on safety the hammer of his Winchester, "they must 'a' knowed you was along. That red topknot o' yores is worse'n a white horse — a dead giveaway wherever y'are. Why don't yuh wear a wig?"

"I would if I was gettin' bald like some long-legged folks I know. But alla same I don't think they seen me'n Tom. No jokin', I don't. We was under that cut-bank two hours before you'n Bert turned up, an' them fellers wasn't on that hill then, I'll gamble on that."

"Naw, they dunno nothin' about us," declared Tom.

"An' they ain't gonna neither," supplemented Red. "Which way you'n Bert goin' back to Flipup?"

"The shortest way," said Bill Derr. "If it's that landlord — "

"You'll keep yore trap shut," Red interrupted quickly. "This ain't no time for rough-housin', Bill. Not by a

jugful it ain't. Slide round cautious an' soft all same moccasin foot. That's all yo're gonna do. Tom an' me'll find out what's what."

"Lookit here!" exclaimed Tom, "if I was you fellers, I wouldn't go back to Flipup. If yuh had any sense, you wouldn't."

"We ain't got no sense," Bill Derr said shortly; "so that lets us out."

"An' also in," grinned Red. "Lordy, I knowed you. You'd have to go back to Flipup — you'd have to tickle the mule's hind heels or you'd think yuh was missin' somethin'. 'S'no use givin' 'em an argument, Tom. Bert's just as bad. When was it yuh said yuh was here before, Bill?"

"Five year ago," said Bill Derr briefly.

"Was Brad Usher here then?"

"I didn't see no sign of him."

"Then he wasn't here — or you'd 'a' seen signs. He believes in signs, that feller. Was you *yoreself* at the time, Bill?"

"Not that trip," said Bill Derr, shaking his head. "I done let my beard grow out a spell."

"Then nobody'd know yuh now. Yore own maw wouldn't behind a faceful o' whiskers. I was just wonderin' about that landlord — Lookit, maybe Brad Usher — Say, did yuh ever hear of him before? Not see — hear?"

"No, I didn't. Whadda you know about Brad Usher, anyway? Yo're always draggin' him in by the tail, I notice. Why? What's he gotta do with — why yo're here?"

"I never said he had nothin' to do with why we're here," Red denied hastily. "Le's be gettin' along to town. Yo're goin' that way, ain't yuh, Bill? Aw right, Tom, you'n me —"

"Wait a shake," cut in the perplexed Bill Derr. "Tell

me what yuh've found out, Red, will yuh? You needn't shake the old head at me, thataway. I know yuh know somethin'."

"Who? Me? Me know anythin' besides my own name? Yo're crazy! Honest yuh are. You'd oughta get that brain of yores looked at by a doc. It might be serious; yuh can't tell. I knowed a feller once, a lot like you, too, face, features an' all, an' he got to talkin' like yo're doin' now, an' pretty soon he was in a rheumatic asylum. You keep yore feet in the stirrups, Bill, an' let two gents who know how work this thing out. When we get the whole story, we'll tell yuh if yuh'll promise to be good an' wait patient. Lookit how nice an' easy Bert is. You don't catch him losin' no tempers."

"You idjit," Bill Derr laughed ruefully. "You poor benighted tomfool, I hope you choke."

Bill Derr and Bert Kinzie were sitting on a packing-box in front of the California Store when Red and Tom rode down Main Street and turned off to go to the hotel corral. Bill Derr had his hat over his eyes. He seemed to be dozing. Knowing Bill, it would be safe to say that he wasn't. Bert Kinzie, engaged in wrapping a quirt-handle with rawhide, slid but a casual, unrecognizing glance at the two horsemen as they passed. Even the landlord, who was draped in careless ease over a window-sill of the hotel, could not have said that Bert had even a nodding acquaintance with the gentlemen named Carey.

From the hotel corral Red and Tom went directly to the office of Bradley Usher. Mr. Usher, occupied in leafing through a large ledger, looked up as the door flew open.

"Si'down," was his greeting. "Be with yuh in a minute."

But it was three before he spoke again, and then he said, with a sidelong look:

"Yo're late. Why?"

"We come when we're ready," was Red's snappy response, "an' not before."

"I see." Mr. Usher blinked at the brothers, closed the ledger and laid it on top of the safe. "Still," he continued, "I wish you'd come sooner. I had a li'l job for yuh."

"Tough luck," commiserated Red.

"I had to give the job to some one else — an' they didn't succeed."

"Yeah?"

The hair at the back of Red's neck began to lift, his skin to prickle. He was like a terrier at a rat hole.

"I don't giveadam for a man that don't succeed," was Mr. Usher's sententious declaration. "They ain't no excuse for not succeedin'. Is they?"

He shot out the question like a bullet.

"Not from where I'm sittin'," said Red.

Tom raised his hand to his face to hide the involuntary lifting of his mouth corners. This brother of his would jest in the path of a stampede.

"Maybe — you'll — succeed." Mr. Usher rubbed his long and shaven chin, his curious black gaze holding Red's eye.

"Maybe," Red, staring steadily back, permitted himself to say.

"Lessee you pull a gun," said Mr. Usher.

Red stood up and drew. Tom wondered at his lack of speed.

"Can't yuh do better'n that?" Mr. Usher's tone was acid.

Red tried and bungled it. His front sight caught and held.

"——!" exclaimed Mr. Usher. "You've got plenty o' nerve, I'll say that for yuh, but yo're only average on the draw. I'd an idee you was faster'n that. Oh, yo're all right with a derringer. I know that. I seen yuh.

But it ain't always close work, an' then a six-shooter is handiest. Lessee what yore brother can do."

But Tom had got the office, and his performance was no whit better than Red's.

Mr. Usher spat his quid out of the window and took off his hat. When a fresh chew was revolving in the hinge of his jaw and the hat was again on his head, he looked up at the ceiling a moment.

"Well," he said, dropping his chin, "I dunno. I'd oughta tried you boys on that draw business last night. No offense, gents, but you wouldn't last the wiggle of a hoss's ear with six-shooters an' a fast gun-fighter."

"We've been lucky," said Red calmly. "What gun-fighter was you wantin' us to rub out?"

"I didn't say nothin' about no gun-fighter I wanted — rubbed out. I was just sayin' somethin'. They's two strangers come to town, an' I want 'em either sent away or settled here permanent."

"Right nice country to take up a claim in," asserted Red.

"She's all o' that," Mr. Usher laughed mirthlessly (when he laughed he resembled more than ever a horse). "These strangers are the two that drifted in this mornin'. One of 'em, the tall, oldest one, is aimin' to ranch it next to one o' my ranches. I ain't aimin' to have 'em. Y' understand."

"Why down 'em both, if only one — "

"The other one's his friend. It'll make it easier to have both go. Look here, I ain't explainin' my business to nobody. I want them parties removed. I don't care how yuh do it. Neither of yuh'd stand a show with the tall buck — he's slow lightnin' on the draw — but they can be bushwhacked, an' not a long distance bushwhack neither. The closer the better. Even if y'ain't much with a rifle, yuh can't miss at twenty or thirty yards."

"You don't want no misses this deal, huh?"

Red patted his knee and smoothed the leather of his chaps with the palm of his hand.

"Misses?" The eyebrows of the money-lender became a straight line. "Whadda yuh mean by 'misses'?"

"Well," said Red smoothly, "the landlord said somethin' to us about suspicionin' them two sports; so Tom an' me made out to trail 'em this mornin'. We wasn't a million mile away when a couple o' sharpshooters — an' they was real sharpshooters — cut down on 'em from that hill about six miles out on the trail to the Rafter O."

"I see," said Mr. Usher, and he added with great bitterness, "I thought them two chunkers could shoot. —— their souls! Now yo're in the saddle. Whirl yore rope."

"Guess we'd better have some rifle cartridges — couple o' fresh boxes .45-90's," said practical Tom.

Mr. Usher nodded, unjointed his long body in a prodigious stretch and led the way to the sleeping apartment in the rear of the warehouse. He dropped on his knees beside the bed and dragged from beneath it a large open wooden box half filled with cartons of rifle cartridges. He scooped up half a dozen cartons in his two hands and tossed the lot upon the horsehide covered desk.

"Help yoreselves," he invited and shoved back the box.

Red angled past the corner of the desk, snicked open a carton with his thumb nail and spilled the cartridges all abroad on the horsehide. While he stood between the desk and the packing-case washstand with its overshadowing shelf, stuffing the slim, lead-tipped brass cylinders into the loops of his cartridge belt, he could not help but perceive clearly that which had previously escaped his roving eye — to wit, a stain, a golden-yellow stain that streakily splotched the red-chestnut horsehide from where it curled over the desk edge to the bottom of the skin.

The stain, which curiously resembled the silhouette of a great hand with thumb and four long fingers outspread, caught and held Red's attention a moment only. But

memory requires no more than a moment — the merest eyeflash will serve — to file away sufficient evidence to stretch many a wicked neck.

"Take one of my boxes, Tom," said Red. "You got more loops than I have."

"You gents want yore first month in advance?" asked Mr. Usher.

"We're willin' to wait," said Red shortly. "We ain't spent all o' that money we got for our ranch yet."

"I see," Mr. Usher nodded. "I forgot about that ranch you — sold. Ain't you fellers kind o' trustin'?"

"How?"

"Folks workin' for me usually want their wages ahead."

"Yeah? Well, I guess maybe we ain't scared o' losin' nothin'. Yuh see, we generally make out to collect whatever's owin' to us no matter who owes us." Thus Red Kane with a wink and a leer.

Mr. Usher cackled a laugh — without merriment, as was his custom.

"Yo're funny," he averred. "Both of yuh are funny. Did yuh stop to think they's such a thing as gettin' too funny?"

"No, we never did," Red said frankly. "An' you'll notice," he added thoughtfully, "we're still alive."

"'Still' ain't 'always'," was the sapient observation of Mr. Usher.

"'Here endeth the first lesson,'" drawled Red. "A hymn comes next as a rule, or will some gent lead in prayer?"

His eyes, wide, innocent, demure, searched the deadly glare of the baited Mr. Usher. It was manifest that the money-lender's patience was teetering on the razor-edge of a break.

Red was ready. So was Tom. The former was positive that he could put two derringer bullets where they

would do the most good before Mr. Usher could reach under his coat. Tom pinned his faith to the six-shooter whose barrel nuzzled his hipbone.

Mr. Usher's self-control continued to teeter on the edge of a break, his soul consequently to balance on the edge of the hereafter. Oh, very near his death was Mr. Usher. The Great Reaper halted on his rounds and prepared to swing his scythe. Mr. Usher smiled. The Great Reaper sighed, shouldered his scythe and passed on regretfully — regretfully, for that it seemed to him that Mr. Bradley Usher had been ripe for the harvest a long, long time.

Mr. Usher's smile widened to a cheerless grin. With difficulty he repressed the impulse to shiver. Odd that he should experience a chill on a warm and sultry morning.

"Hell," exclaimed Mr. Usher. "I like you two. Damfino why, but I do."

The brothers' steady gaze contained no warmth. They were as pleased as if a rattlesnake had suddenly become affectionate.

"Yeah?" said Red Kane. "Don't strain yoreself."

"I won't. Now, I'm takin' a li'l trip. I may not be back for ten days or a couple of weeks. If you want anythin', money or the like o' that, ask the hotel landlord, Skinner. He'll be in charge here while I'm away. An', when I come back, I hope they'll be a couple o' two-legged calves the less in Flipup."

"They'll be less all right," Red laughed harshly. "They'll be considerable less. You can stick a pin in that."

CHAPTER THIRTY

THE UNEXPECTED

"We'll give him two days' start, an' that's a-plenty," muttered Red to his brother as they watched Mr. Usher ease his long body into the stage in front of the express office.

"You bet," was Tom's endorsement. "Do we eat or don't we?"

Heartily refreshed by a pound or two of boot-heel steak, greasy fried potatoes and pints of strong coffee, they repaired to the shady side of the hotel for the purpose of thoroughly cleaning their firearms.

The weapons did not require more than the flick of a rag, but it was needful to hold speech with Skinner. Red knew the man would join them. He did — within the hour.

"Want some machine oil, gents?" he asked affably, standing before them, his hands in his pockets.

"What we got's good enough, thank yuh most to death," replied Red, taking some of the curse from his sarcasm with a cheerful grin. "Ain't you through with that rawhide, Tom? You'll wear out the riflin' if y'ain't careful."

"I'll get yuh another string," offered Skinner, jingling the coins in his pockets.

"Nemmine no string," said Red. "He's through with it now. I see," he added in a drawl as he stuck a piece of white paper in the open breech of his rifle and squinted down the bore, "I see yore memory's improved."

Skinner leaned against the wall and tried to look wise.

"Meanin' how?" he queried.

"How? Why — That riflin' ain't pitted, is it? Naw, it's oil, thassall. Lordy, I thought for once I was out o' luck. Meanin' — Huh? What was that you said, Mister?"

"I said meanin' how?"

"How? Oh, yeah, yore memory, shore. Thassit. Ain't a feller's memory a odd number? Yuh'll forget an forget, an' then all of a sudden yuh'll remember everythin' plain as the brand on a hoss."

"Plainer'n some brands," hinted Skinner with a fatuous wink.

"You keep away from that corral," directed Red gravely. "You might strain yore eyes lookin' too close at — things."

"I expect. But — maybe I didn't look at — things. Maybe somebody told me."

"Which is all a heap possible — a heap possible. But we was talkin' o' memories, wasn't we? My memory's sort o' like yores was, 'cause I can't remember straight through yet. I got the start of it."

He began to hum "John Peel" in slow time and try with a knife-blade the screwheads in his rifle-butt.

"Start o' what?" prompted the inquisitive Skinner.

"O' what? Oh, yeah, I mean I'm beginnin' — we're beginnin' — to get the notion we seen that long feller some'ers, too. We ain't neither of us shore — yet."

"Long feller."

Skinner endeavored to exchange his wise expression for one of penetrating sharpness.

"Shore — our friend, yores an' mine. The one who was shot at this mornin'. Two hundred yards' range an' couldn't nick him. Ragged work, ragged work."

"It was half a mile," corrected Skinner. "If they'd gone where I told 'em to — "

He spat disgustedly.

"Then you wasn't in the li'l party," drawled Red, vigorously rubbing the rag over his magazine and barrel.

"I was not." Thus Skinner with great vehemence. "If I'd been there, they wouldn't 'a' come back to dinner, neither of 'em. Will they be here for supper, I wonder?"

"Maybe; then again, maybe not. Yuh can't never tell in this country. But you can put down a bet yuh won't need to board 'em always."

"I guess not," nodded Skinner.

"Where was it you seen that feller?" inquired Red, ceasing to beat about the bush.

"Up in Slingtown once. He was trailin' a rustler. He got him."

"Association detective like you said, huh?"

"He was off an' on — whenever any big job come on anyway."

"I'm rememberin' a li'l better. When Tom an' me knowed him, seems to me he worked for the Gov'ment. How about it, Tom?"

"Yep," grunted Tom. "You hit it."

"Maybe he's workin' for them now," suggested Red.

"Nah," denied Skinner. "He's after —" The landlord caught himself. "What was his name when you knowed him?" he continued in an altered tone.

"I didn't know him. Never think it, an' I can't remember his name neither. But you do."

"Shore."

"What was it? Lordy, man —" as the landlord still hesitated — "ain't we all li'l friends together? What yuh hangin' back in the breechin' for?"

"I dunno how much you know," was the cryptic reply.

"You can take it we know all we need to know," said Red severely. "Lookit, Skinner, wasn't his name Durham, or somethin'?"

"His name's Derr, Bill Derr," shortly.

"Well, if he's after Brad Usher," drawled Red, looking at the landlord from beneath his eyebrows, "whyfor did he let Brad slide off in the stage?"

"He ain't after Brad," promptly denied Skinner. "What makes yuh think that? Say, you want too much information, you do."

"Lookit, feller," said Red, his drawl drawlier than ever, "if I'm a-doin' anythin' you don't like, why — I'm here an' yo're here. What's fairer than that?"

"I didn't mean nothin'," grumbled the landlord, "but — but I ain't got no orders to talk."

The landlord wrapped himself in his tattered dignity and withdrew round the corner of the house. Soon they heard him wrangling with the cook.

"Skinner knows, bless his honest li'l heart," whispered Red out of one corner of his mouth. "But they's no gettin' anythin' out o' Skinner now. Maybe later — "

He did not finish the sentence. It wasn't necessary.

Red and his brother spent the remainder of the afternoon in guncleaning and saddlery-overhaul. Two or three times they were conscious of Skinner peering at them from neighboring points of vantage. From five o'clock till supper time, Skinner, seated across the street, kept them under close observation. Derr and Kinzie were loafing in front of the hotel and were included in the scope of Mr. Skinner's vision. It was obvious that Skinner had something on his mind.

After supper, when dusk was merging with night, Red missed his pocket knife. Believing he had left it in the dining room, he re-entered the hotel. It was pitch dark in the dining room. Standing in the doorway, he struck a match. At first his dazzled eyes did not perceive that the room had an occupant. Then, as he cupped a protecting hand round the match and advanced toward the table, he saw the landlord across the room. Skinner stood in front of one of the windows and faced him si-

lently. Skinner's legs were spread wide, his arms were akimbo. He looked annoyed.

"I don't see what yuh hadda come bustin' in thisaway for," he grumbled.

"Whyfor not?" countered the mildly surprised Red. "What's it to you, I'd like — Say, is that a rifle stickin' across the window-sill?"

He saw that it was a rifle just as the match went out. He did not scratch another. One hand on the butt of his six-shooter, he slid round the table and approached the silhouette blotting the gray rectangle of the window.

"What's the game?" he demanded in a whisper. "What is this, anyway?"

"Whadda yuh s'pose?" was the husky rejoinder. "You got yore orders, an' I got mine."

Red was beside Skinner. He looked past him through the window. There, not forty feet distant, standing on the sidewalk in the full glare of the light from a saloon window, was Bert Kinzie.

"I'd 'a' got him if you hadn't come ringin' in an lit matches all over the place," complained Skinner. "Now he's gonna move. Told yuh so."

"That feller was one half of our job," whispered Red. "What you gotta horn in for?"

"I got my orders. I know what I'm doin'. All you need to know is yore job would 'a' been half done if you'd stayed out o' this dinin' room."

"Yeah?" drawled Red, holding his rapidly rising temper with both hands and sitting down upon it hard. "Yeah? Brad Usher don't leave nothin' to chance, does he?"

"He don't."

"I should say not. They's nothin' like goin' the whole hawg while yo're at it. But don't fret, old-timer, we're plenty able to do our job up proper, an' they ain't no need for you to risk yore valuable life a-bushwhackin' folks

promiscuous. As I was sayin', Skinner, we need a li'l advance, Tom an' me. How about it?"

"As you was sayin'! Y'ain't said nothin' about it before. What yuh come in here for, huh?"

"I come in to look for my knife, which same has hopped out o' my pants pocket. But nemmine the knife. Don't worry none about it. I'd just as soon have the money."

"I s'pose you would. How much do yuh want? Don't be too proud. I only got about forty-three wheels in the till."

"Lordy, man, what good is chicken-feed to us? We need eighty apiece."

"Eighty apiece!"

"Gotta have it! So yuh might's well shut up. If you ain't got a hundred'n sixty in the till, Brad Usher's got it in his safe, an' don't try to tell me different. We'll go with yuh, Tom an' me, while yuh get it. He's out in the street some'ers. We'll pick him up on the way. C'mon!"

Five minutes later Skinner, kneeling in front of the safe in Mr. Usher's office and working the combination, heard a most unchancy sound at his back. Which sound was caused by the sliding home of the huge bolt on the door. Skinner's fingers froze to the dial. He was sufficiently experienced not to turn round.

"Go'n," ordered Red.

"Don't stop," supplemented Tom. "Never mind us a-tall."

"Don't start to yell neither," amplified Red. "I'm sayin' 'start', y'understand, 'cause you won't never finish that yell — leastways not in this world."

Skinner sagged back on his heels.

"I forget the combination," he said sullenly.

"Yo're a liar," declared Red. "Don't contradict me. Yo're a liar by the clock. I can see it in the back o' yore

head. Tom, I do believe we gotta be rough with this jigger."

"'Sa shame," said Tom.

"She is, you bet. While yo're figgerin' out what happens to liars, Skinner, s'pose you tell us somethin'. Why is Bill Derr here in Flipup?"

Mr. Skinner clamped his plump jaws.

"Tom," continued Red in his gentlest tone, "would you mind seein' if them shutters is good an' tight — no cracks in 'em anywheres? While yo're doin' that, I'll collect the six-shooter in Skinner's hip-pocket. That's shore one bad place to pack a gun, feller. Unhandy, yeah. Just stay right where y'are, Skinner. I know. You was thinkin' of movin' the lamp, wasn't yuh? I'll move it for yuh, see, where yuh won't be able to reach it before I can reach you."

Red laughed at his own pleasantry. So did not Skinner. He drew his wretched brows together. What might portend, he could not guess. But there was a most sinister threat in Red's calm manner. And he, Skinner, had walked into the trap with eyes wide open. That was what galled.

"Who is Bill Derr after?" pursued Red.

"I ain't none shore," equivocated Skinner.

"Now that's tough," mourned Red, his right hand flicking out like the head of a striking snake. *Smack!* Skinner promptly smote the floor with cheek bone, nose and shoulder. He sat up and fingered a tingling ear.

"You see," Red said brightly, "I only used the heel o' my hand on yuh. If I ever hit you right, yore second cousins will feel the shock. You lousy pup," he went on, mindful of the wrongs suffered by the Lentons at the hands of Usher and his adherents, "you'd oughta be lynched, an' I guess you will be. Whadda you think? Ain't sayin' nothin', huh? Tha's bad. Tom, you got the sharpest skinnin'-knife. Lend her to me a shake."

At which dismal words Skinner's dishonest heart skipped several beats.

"He's gotta be gagged first," said Tom.

"Shore. He'll yell his head off if he ain't. Use his own bandana, I would."

At Tom's approach Skinner braced back against the safe and flung out protesting hands.

"Gents, gents," he cried, "what yuh gonna do to me?"

"Hog-tie yuh, gag yuh, lay yuh out on the floor," was Red's reply. "When yo're all so flat and fancy, I'm gonna take this skinnin'-knife —" Red held up the long-bladed weapon and turned it slowly in the rays of the lamp — "an' stick the point under yore finger nails, one finger nail at a time, y'understand, an' a li'l bit at a time. Djever run a splinter under yore finger nail, Skinner?"

"If yo're thinkin' of yellin' for help," nipped in Tom quickly, reading a half-formed purpose on Skinner's face, "remember what my brother said about yore yellin'. I'm sayin' the same. We always agree. You'd be surprised how agreeable him an' me always are."

"Yuh — yuh wouldn't torture me, gents!" wailed the properly horrified Skinner.

"No, we wouldn't. We wouldn't think o' such a thing. Only Injuns torture folks. We're white. So we're only arguin' *with* an' persuadin' *of* you, Mr. Skinner. See the difference?"

Skinner's complexion was turned a blotchy saffron-yellow. His eyes, ever slightly protuberant, were fairly popping with the fear that oppressed his soul.

"How about it, feller? Hog-tie or squeak?" demanded Tom, his hands on the knot of Skinner's neckerchief.

"What yuh wanna know?" Sullenly resigned.

"Ain't Bill Derr down here after the murderer of Dick Lenton?" snapped out Red, who had from the very

beginning clearly perceived how he could make capital out of Derr's arrival.

"I — guess — maybe." Uncertainly.

"You know it," drove home Red. "Brad Usher told yuh."

Skinner's frightened eyes admitted as much.

"Who is the killer?" prompted Tom Kane.

Came a knocking at the door, and Skinner's tongue at once stuck to his teeth.

"Skinner," whispered Red, "Tom's gonna open the door. Whoever comes in, you talk to 'em like nothin' had happened. I'll set right here with my left hand behind the wing o' my chaps. They'll be a derringer in my hand, Skinner, a li'l ol' derringer with two barrels. Count 'em, two, so yuh see I ain't deceivin' yuh. Don't give no warnin's, Skinner. No winks, nods or nothin', an' don't try to leave the room. Si'down on the table there an' swing yore feet like yuh hadn't nothin' on yore mind but yore hair. Thassit. Sit up, you hunk o' fat! Git some backbone in yore spine."

Tom drew the long bolt, turned the knob and opened the door. Entered then, walking with feline grace on the balls of his small feet, Mr. Hollister.

"Howdy," said Red, not failing to observe that there was more than a dash of the furtive in Mr. Hollister's manner.

"Evenin'," returned Hollister, staring unblinkingly at Red.

The latter, secure in the knowledge that several weeks' growth of whiskers obscured the features of himself and brother, nodded pleasantly.

"Take a chair," he suggested. "Make yoreself at home."

"I always do," was the flip acceptance. "Where's Brad, Skinner?"

"Takin' a trip," Red answered for Skinner.

"I was speakin' to Skinner." Thus Hollister, rebukingly.

"They's no law against that as I know of. Hop to it."

"What yuh boltin' the door for?" Hollister demanded, turning to Tom.

"We ain't exactly anxious for visitors."

Hollister's wide mouth stretched into a smile. It might be said that he beamed.

"Why didn't yuh say so at first?" he asked. "How'd I know you was all right?"

He perched himself on the extreme edge of a chair, pushed back his hat, pulled a blue silk handkerchief from the breast pocket of his flannel shirt and mopped his hot forehead.

"Yuh dropped somethin'," said Red, for, coincident with the drawing out of the handkerchief a small, hard object had shot across the intervening space and plunked down on his lap.

He picked up that which had fallen and tossed it back to Hollister, but not before his eyes had glimpsed it fairly. It was the wood-carving of an Indian girl's head, almost a replica of the head Bill Derr carried as a pocket piece — a smaller edition of the one beside the letter file on the desk of Mr. Usher.

"That's one clever li'l carvin'," was Red's comment. "Djuh do it yoreself?"

"No," Hollister denied carelessly, dropping the head into a vest pocket. "I ain't so handy with a knife."

"I wonder," said Red softly. "Is yore hair really yaller?"

Hollister, despite the menace he read in the other's tone, did not snatch at his gun. For a ring of cold metal was resting cosily against the back of his neck. Tom Kane had come alive.

"Yuh see," drawled Red, "I had a look at you once in

Farewell, an' yore hair was right yaller. To-night, even by the light of the lamp, she's sort o' black at the roots. Brad Usher's got some stuff in a bottle that turns a red-chestnut hide yaller. Might it turn black hair yaller, huh? An', workin' on from that, might you be comin' here to-night for a bottle o' that stuff? I wonder, feller, I wonder."

"What yuh ravin' about?" snarled Hollister. "Yo're crazy — crazy as bats! Whatsa matter with yuh? What yuh holdin' me up thisaway for?"

"For luck," Red replied placidly. "Might yore name be John Hudson, by any chance?"

"It might — only it ain't."

"Ain't it? We'll see. Keep yore paws up! Tom's only takin' yore gun away, thassall. Yo're shore yore name ain't John Hudson, feller? Aw right, no call to get het. If you ain't John Hudson, they ain't a knife-scar on yore right arm half-way between yore shoulder an' yore elbow. Tom, would you mind rollin' up the gent's sleeve?"

On the instant Hollister ducked and halfwheeled. In the neighborhood of his beltbuckle a derringer crashed and spat with a burst of orange flame. Burning powder-grains dotted Red's forehead and a hot breath singed his skin. Red's hammer clicked even as Tom smashed Hollister across the head with the barrel of his gun.

Hollister bent backward and dropped in a heap. He lay without motion, a thin trickle of blood staining the floor boards beneath his head.

"Misfire," said Red calmly, snapping open his derringer. "First I ever had."

"Lucky she wasn't yore last."

"Is that so? Yo're a fine side-kicker, you are! Yo're supposed to take away his artillery, an' he hides out a derringer on yuh an' fills my face full o' powder an' misses my nose by the thickness of a thin dime. An' all

you gotta say is, 'Yo're lucky.' 'Yo're lucky,' huh? Say —"

"Aw, you ain't hurt, you bellerin' calf! What's a li'l scorchin'? You make me sick. I can't always remember everythin' — Where's Skinner? Say, where is he? Who's a fine partner now? I'm askin' yuh, who is? You was supposed to look after Skinner, wasn't yuh? An' didja? Didja? Yuh did not! He slides out from under yore eyes like yuh was blind. First that Art Teller, an' now Skinner!"

The smarting Red slipped in another cartridge and dashed into the pitch-blackness of the warehouse. He had not taken six steps when he tripped on a case of canned tomatoes and fell head-first into a collection of buckboard and wagon wheels. He scrambled to his feet with a barked shin and skinned features and had the extreme dissatisfaction of hearing the door at the other end of the warehouse creak open and slam shut. Mr. Skinner had made good his departure.

Red returned to the office. His brother was kneeling beside the prostrate and still senseless Hollister. The latter's right sleeve was rolled up almost to the shoulder seam.

"Don't tell me he got away on yuh!" Tom sneered savagely. "What didja hit with yore face — the floor? An' yuh needn't explain neither if yuh gotta yell thisaway. I ain't deef. Lookit this jigger's arm. They's that scar."

Red explored the pockets of Hollister's vest. From the second pocket he drew an expensive hunting-case gold watch. Red clicked open the case. On the reverse side were several lines of engraving setting forth that the inhabitants of Piegan City presented the watch to the Governor of the Territory as a token of their affection and esteem.

"Which this sort o' tangles Hollister in the road-

agent business," nodded Red, dangling the watch. "I wish he'd 'a' waited another minute before knockin'," he added dolefully. "Skinner was just gonna gimme the name o' that murderer."

"They's no use chasin' Skinner now," declared Tom, "an' yuh might as well go tell Bill Derr we got one of his road agents."

"I guess I might," said Red heavily. "Stick Hollister's Injun head in yore pocket an' get the other off Usher's desk while I'm gone, will yuh, Tom?"

. . . . . .

"I dunno when I been so pleasantly surprised in all my life," said Bill Derr, looking down at the now gagged and glaring prisoner. "You'd oughta stuck to yore rustlin', John. Playin' two hands to once ain't poker. Red, are you shore nobody heard that derringer?"

"If they did, they didn't come a-hornin' in to find out. Why?"

"'Cause I wanna get this Hollister-Hudson out o' this. He ain't all we're lookin' for, but he's somethin', an' whatsa sense o' waitin' three-four weeks for extradition papers when she's only thirty miles to the State line?"

"Which that's the brightest thought you ever had," said Red. "You'll need an extra hoss. They's my black all ready a-waitin'. You an' Bert stick here, Bill, while me'n Tom do the needful. They's no sense in either of yuh fussin' round the corral or the hotel either. War-bags in yore room, yuh? Aw right, we'll get 'em. Take yore hands out o' yore pockets. She ain't necessary to pay the landlord. Because why? 'Cause in the first place I caught him tryin' to bushwhack Bert here with a .45-90 about a half-hour ago, an' in the second place he's done sloped an' ain't here no more."

"You caught him tryin' to bushwhack me!" repeated the startled Bert.

"From a side window o' the hotel dinin' room. So

whatsa use o' botherin' with a man like that? Aw, s'all right Bert, s'all right. No trouble a-tall to curry a li'l short hoss like that. C'mon, Tom."

"Where do you guess Skinner'll go?" asked Tom, when he and his brother were pulling off their boots in their room that night.

"Maybe he'll go after Usher; maybe he'll go visitin' friends or take a trip to Yurrup. They say that's a great country — kings an' queens an' all like that."

"S'pose now he hooks up with Rum Durkin an' Spunk Lenn? She's more'n likely they're out in the hills some-'ers waitin' for friend Hollister — or maybe they're in town this minute. I never thought o' that."

Tom reached again for his boots.

"Clam down, ol' squinchmore, clam down," advised Red, stretching out his legs and wriggling his toes. "I ain't gonna do no more kitin' round to-night, an' you ain't neither. Call it a day, for Gawd's sake, call it a day!"

From the boots Tom's hand came away reluctantly.

"Well —" he began, then changed direction with, "Listen here, cowboy, would yuh really 'a' stuck the point o' that skinnin'-knife under his finger nails?"

"Would you?"

"I dunno." Business of doubtful head-scratching.

"Neither do I. Quit yawpin' fool questions an' lemme go to sleep, will yuh?"

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

THE DUST CLOUD

In the morning Red and Tom went to breakfast as though nothing untoward had occurred. The hasher when she served them and the cook glancing in did not bend upon them the darkling eye of suspicion.

But it seemed to them, when they left the hotel to walk abroad, that Mr. Dick Stratton, a hundred yards down the street, dodged round a corner rather swiftly.

Red and Tom promptly followed the example set. Then, being wide between the eyes, they separated.

Mr. Dick Stratton, crouching with malice aforethought and a gun in his hand behind a spare wagon box stored in an open space between a corral and an empty house, heard an apologetic cough in his rear. Mr. Stratton turned a slow head. Twenty yards away Red Kane stood staring at him. Red's gun was out. He was smiling. Mr. Stratton discerned no sweetness in the smile.

"Have you lost somethin'?" queried Red.

"Lost somethin'?" repeated Dick Stratton, his eyes venomous. "What makes you think I've lost anythin'?"

"'Cause you look just like a gent who's a-huntin' for somethin' a heap anxious — a heap anxious."

Dick Stratton was consumed with hate at Red's drawl, but he said never a word. He might have been a man of stone, so still he held his muscles.

"Maybe my brother Tom can help yuh — in what yo're doin'," suggested Red. "He's yonder on yore right."

Dick Stratton did not turn his head. He continued to regard Red unblinkingly with his cold and fishy eyes. But an observer, looking closely, might have seen upon his forehead small and starting dots of moisture.

"Scrape your foot, Tom," said Red. "He don't believe me."

Tom scraped his foot. Dick Stratton batted his eyes.

"If yo're thinkin' o' raisin' that gun," Red remarked conversationally, "I'd think a li'l longer. Yeah, I would so. Say, Stratton, what was you doin' over on the trail to the Rafter O yes'day?"

This last at a venture.

"Huh?" frowned Dick Stratton.

"You an' that friend o' yores, I'd oughta said," Red galloped on, "'cause they was two o' yuh. What did yuh cut down on us for anyway? We hadn't done yuh no harm."

Red's tone was high and whining, but Mr. Stratton was not deceived. He was a gambler and as such accustomed to taking chances, but he was beginning to find the morning chilly.

"What did yuh do it for?" persisted Red. "A half inch lower an' you'd 'a' bust my hoss's back."

"Why, yore hoss wasn't hit," denied Mr. Stratton, surprised out of his cautious silence.

"So you looked, didja?" drawled Red, his smile broadening as his eyes narrowed. "Then you *was* up on that hill. Who was with yuh? Is he layin' for us too behind a doorway or somethin'?"

It may have been that Mr. Stratton thought he saw a movement of Red's gun hand. It may have been that he merely wished to terminate the conversation in the most effective manner. At any rate he went into sharp action at the tail of Red's words. Even as his body jerked to one side, his six-shooter twinkled out and up and spat a dart of flame once and once only. For Red's

gun had beaten the barrier by a shade and driven an accurate bit of lead through and through the gambler's shoulder.

Nevertheless Dick Stratton did not wilt. Despite the burning pain in his right shoulder that made his head swim, his left hand groped toward the fallen gun.

But Red's boot-toe reached the weapon first and kicked it three yards away.

"——," muttered Mr. Stratton, and he sat up and held his wounded shoulder while the blood ran through his fingers.

"Here comes the other one," said Red, as pelting feet thudded on the sidewalk beyond the corral.

A gentleman carrying a double-barreled shotgun skidded round the corner of the corral. At sight of Red and Tom and their extreme readiness for battle he halted, dropped the shotgun and tossed his hands up all in one motion.

The gentleman was a total stranger to the brothers, but he had a guileful eye. Red ordered him to advance, and he continued to hold him up with alert care while Tom searched him for offensive arms.

From saloons and stores and residences came the inhabitants of Flipup, both male and female, and looked on from a distance. Mr. Stratton continued to drip redly through his fingers.

"I'm bleedin' to death," he complained.

"No such luck," contradicted the unfeeling Red. "We'll attend to yore case when we get through with yore friend here."

"Ain't my friend," grunted the suffering Stratton.

"He'd like to be then," grinned Red. "He's been winkin' at yuh steady for the last minute. I wonder does he know Skinner. Feller, do you know Skinner?"

The gentleman with the guileful eye shook his head promptly.

"Never heard of him in my life," he denied. "I'm a stranger here."

"You'll keep right on bein' one, too, 'cause yo're leavin' us now."

"What's the row?" A well-known voice, a bustle in the crowd. The marshal and his bulbous nose had arrived.

"Row," repeated Red, without removing his gaze from the gentleman of the guileful eye, "I don't see no row. Tom, gent wants a row. You seen any?"

"I don't even see the beginnin's of one," Tom replied significantly, looking hard at the marshal.

The marshal returned the stare with difficulty. He had long since realized the caliber of the brothers. He wished most fervently for the heartening presence of Bradley Usher. He would know how to settle in jig-time the shooting of Stratton. The marshal's shifting gaze signaled his indecision.

"Look here, Marshal," burst forth the man with the guileful eye, "ain't yuh got nothin' to say in this town a-tall no more? This jigger with the gun says I gotta leave town."

"Don't yuh think he'd better, Marshal?" asked Red softly. "It'll save trouble if you sort o' string yore chips with mine."

The emphasis on the word "trouble" had been ever so slight, but the marshal's sense of hearing was acute. Yet he hesitated.

Bang! Red's six-shooter crashed. The gentleman with the guileful eye jumped two feet in the air and clapped a hand to an agonized ear, the tip of which was missing.

"Stick them hands up!" bawled Red. "You ain't lost nothin' to speak of o' that ear. You got all the rest to hear with. One an' a fraction is good enough for a white man, let alone a hoss-thief like yoreself. How

about it, Marshal? Ain't Flipup better off without this sharp?"

"You bet she is," declared the officer, whom Red's unexpected shot — even as Red had intended — had brought to see the light. "I'll see he leaves town myself."

"I'll help you see," said Red dryly and faced about his captive.

"I'd like my shotgun an' that six-shooter the other feller took off me," protested the prisoner, hanging back in the breeching.

"You can keep right on likin'. They ain't no law against it. Git a-goin'."

The captive got. A gun muzzle jammed with great force into one's lumbar region is a potent persuader.

Together Red and the marshal escorted the gentleman with the guileful eye to the hitching-rail in front of the Pansy saloon.

"I'll be back," snarled the fellow, swinging up.

"Be shore I ain't here when you come," Red advised pleasantly. "You got one minute to get out o' range."

Somewhat to Red's regret the stranger beat out the sixty seconds by a safe margin.

Red turned to the marshal.

"Who was that feller?" he queried.

"Don't yuh know him?" said the marshal, elevating surprised eyebrows. "That's Bill Doran. He's Brad Usher's foreman out at the Empire."

"The Empire Mine?"

"Shore."

"Then he ain't exactly a stranger in Flipup, is he?"

"Not much he ain't. Why?"

"I was just wonderin', just wonderin'. Say, he's turned to the left where the trail forks. Is that the Empire trail? — Yeah? Plain trail alla way, huh? Ain't Nature wonderful?"

"But what's Brad Usher gonna say about it all?"

worried the marshal, heeding not Red's nonsense. "His men ain't never quarreled among themselves before."

"Djever stop to think we maybe had our orders? They's such a thing as Usher gettin' tired of part of his help. I ain't tellin' all I know, but you can put down a bet shootin' Stratton an' runnin' out Doran was a heap the proper caper."

"So that's how it is." The marshal drew a relieved breath. "I guessed that might be the way of it. I wonder what them two done to get Brad on the prod."

"You'll have to ask Brad, or maybe Skinner'd know."

Red was watching the marshal closely when he mentioned the landlord's name. The officer's expression did not alter.

"Yeah," he said without interest. "We better be gettin' back."

"Shore," assented Red, beginning to think that the marshal knew nothing of the difficulty of the previous evening. "Stratton oughta be fixed up."

"I s'pose I'll have to see he's took care of till he's able to travel," grumbled the marshal. "I don't see why Brad —"

"They ain't no use fussin' about Brad," Red cut him short sharply. "He does things the way he likes an' has 'em done similar. You don't see Skinner round town anywhere, do yuh?"

"Skinner. Yuh don't mean —"

"I mean Skinner's left town, an' I don't think he'll be back right away."

The marshal stopped short in his tracks and stared helplessly at Red Kane.

"Why, Skinner was about as close to Brad as his skin."

"He ain't no more."

Red could not repress a smile. It was pleasant to be absolutely sure that Skinner had not talked with the mar-

shal before leaving town. Which being so, it was doubtful whether he had unbosomed himself to any one save Stratton and the Empire Mine foreman.

"I wouldn't 'a' believed it," muttered the marshal, half to himself. "Skinner! Who'd 'a' thought it! Huh?"

"Nothin'. C'mon. Mustn't let Stratton go too long."

But they found on reaching the scene of the shooting that Stratton had been bandaged and removed to the shack he shared with the bartender of Rouse's Rest. He was reported by a friend to be resting easily.

"Tha's good," said Red. "You needn't pick that up," he added coldly as the friend stooped to retrieve Stratton's six-shooter.

The friend snatched away his fingers as if the metal had been white-hot. Red scooped up the six-shooter and weighed it in the palm of his hand.

"I always like to keep my souvenirs," he told the embarrassed friend. "You might tell Stratton that."

"I — uh — I will," stuttered the friend and went elsewhere hastily.

The marshal, who knew the friend to be weaker than himself, smiled openly, but Red's countenance remained unmoved. He nodded to the marshal and crossed to where Tom, Doran's shotgun in the crook of his arm, was leaning against the posts of the corral.

"Le's get our hosses, Tom," said he in a low voice, "an' take a li'l ride."

"Where?"

"To return that shotgun. It belongs to the foreman o' the Empire Mine."

"Now yo're whistlin'," said the thoroughly delighted Tom.

Together they went to the hotel corral. The marshal watched them depart and gnawed his under-lip the while.

"I wonder what *is* up," he asked himself. "Skinner! Who'd 'a' thought it?"

Bill Doran was leaning over the kitchen table bathing his afflicted ear and swearing. So engrossed was he in his immediate affairs that he did not observe a shadow that passed the window, a shadow that stopped at the doorway and fell athwart the kitchen floor.

Something brushed Bill Doran's shoulder and clattered down upon the table with a force that made the basin dance. Which something was a double-barreled shotgun.

Bill Doran at the touch and crash jumped and whirled like a bee-stung horse and made a futile movement with his hand.

"No use reachin' at that empty holster," remarked Red, stepping into the kitchen. "We still got yore gun. You fellers are shore a fine lot to go after anybody. Yo're as bad as Stratton. Don't you ever look behind yuh?"

Bill Doran, backing away, butted into the wall.

"The doorway into the other room is four feet to yore left," drawled Red, "if that's what yo're lookin' for. Nemmine it now. Yo're all right where y'are. Lookit, feller, howja get hold o' the shotgun that killed Dick Lenton?"

At this there was a sudden thud and a pad-pad of bare feet in the next room. Red, leaving Tom to guard Bill Doran, jumped through the doorway in time to see the volatile Mr. Skinner in singlet and shirt escaping through the window. Red hurled himself after and was lucky enough to grab an ankle. Red followed his prey into the outer air and was kicked in the eye by a calloused heel. Together he and Skinner rolled among discarded cans and empty bottles and clawed and tore and smote till Red drove a knee into Skinner's stomach. Instantly the latter went limp. Red arose minus a section of shirt and dragged the gasping Skinner by the left leg into the house.

When Skinner could talk he addressed himself to Bill Doran.

"Why didn't yuh tell me they was comin'?" he demanded bitterly.

"Why didn't yuh come to life when I asked yuh to tie up my ear?" returned Bill Doran. "If yuh'd done that instead o' sleepin' away like a prize hawg, this wouldn't 'a' happened. You'd 'a' heard 'em comin'. Howja think I can hear anythin' with one ear full o' blood? I never could hear so awful good out o' the other, an' you know it. You make me sick! If these two idjits with the guns wasn't so rambunctious, I'd shore make you hard to find."

"Yah-h!" sneered Skinner with a malevolent grin.

"I got three men workin' here," went on Bill Doran, transferring his attention to the brothers. "They'll —"

"I seen 'em," Red interrupted placidly. "Old fellers they was, the three. Besides, they're in the tunnel. We seen 'em go in before we come out in the open. Don't fret about them doin' nothin'. They won't. Nemmine edgin' any closer to Skinner, Bill. 'Tain't polite to go nudgin' folks yuh dunno, an' yuh told me yoreself less'n a half hour ago yuh didn't know Skinner. Thassall right. I don't wonder yuh was ashamed to admit yuh knowed him. Be ashamed myself, an' Gawd knows I ain't partic'lar. Skinner, stop squinchin' yore feet an' look at me. We was interrupted last time we met, an' you went away without sayin' so long. S'pose now yuh go on from where yuh left off."

"Interruptions are becomin' a habit," grunted Skinner. "We're gonna be again."

At the same instant Red heard the approaching horse and went to the door. Along the Flipup trail raced a rider. The horse he did not recognize. Thirty seconds later Red saw that the rider was Bert Kinzie. The latter dashed up, jerked his horse to a rearing halt, and cried:

"They're after yuh! Git a-goin'!"

"Who's after us?" demanded Red.

"Most o' Flipup. Nemmine askin' questions. Yuh ain't got time. Tell yuh about it later. Git a-goin'."

Red Kane sprang back indoors.

"C'mon, you fellers!" he shouted to Bill Doran and Skinner. "Get out to the corral! Pick up yore saddles an' bridles first! Quick!"

"Whatcha want them for?" asked Bert Kinzie in astonishment as Red and Tom herded their captives to the corral.

"Do you know any shortcut out o' this country?"

"Shore not — only the trails."

"Me too. But these fellers live here. They know the way the cañons run. They'll show us the way out. Git along, you two. Stand there by the woodpile."

From their position at the woodpile the prisoners could not see the trail to town and the distant dust-cloud that hung above it.

Red knocked free the yard-long lever of the wire-fastened gate and ran in to rope two of the three horses standing in hipshot drowsiness in a shady corner. To his disgust he discovered that two of the horses were lame — one in the off shoulder, the other in the near fore. Red returned to the gate swearing and dragging the third animal. Bill Doran's mouth lifted at one corner.

"I thought I was out o' luck when I lamed that gray comin' home this mornin'," he said with a chuckle. "Now yuh can only take one of us."

"Just for that," drawled Red, bridling the gray, looking from beneath his eyebrows at the face of Skinner, "just for that we're gonna take you, Doran. Aw right, Tom?"

Tom, who had been passing the cinchstraps, leaped back to his own horse.

"Git aboard, Skinner," Red ordered sharply.

"Me? I thought you was gonna take Bill!" A grievous horror was in Skinner's face and tone.

"I changed my mind when I seen how yore face changed from sad to happy when I told Doran I'd take him. Don't pull that rope too tight, Tom. He's gotta breathe. Git aboard."

The cold, hard muzzle of Tom's six-shooter jabbed Skinner in the short ribs. He stuck his bare toes in the stirrup and swung up with a wail of —

"For Gawd's sake, gents, lemme put on my pants!"

Red ran to the house while Bert Kinzie and Tom Kane fidgeted in their saddles with impatience. They, too, had seen the distant dust-cloud. Every second brought it nearer.

Within a half minute Red returned on the run, a shapeless bundle under his arm and a merry glint in his eye. Under the circumstances the glint seemed out of place.

"Where's my hat?" demanded Skinner.

"You don't need no hat," replied Red, mounting with difficulty by reason of the bundle. "Let's go, Skinner. You'n me'll lead the way."

"Them ain't my pants!" cried Skinner, eying the bundle.

"Ain't they? That's tough. Skinner, if we're caught by that posse, you won't never need to make a fuss about pants again. An', if you gamble with us by fallin' off, just remember they's only twenty feet o' slack between the loop o' rope round yore neck and Tom's saddlehorn. Now you get us to the line the shortest way. How about it, Skinner?"

"Straight for that cañon," directed the sulky Skinner.

Red waved an ironic farewell to Bill Doran.

"So long," he shouted. "I'll ask Skinner about that shotgun."

The four horsemen, well bunched, whirled past the end of the corral. Skinner rapped out a hearty oath.

"Yeah," called Red above the thudding beat of the flying horseshoes, "that cloud o' dust ain't more'n two miles away, but it ain't gonna do you a bit o' good. Naw-sir."

"Gimme them clo'es," demanded Skinner.

"Yo're talkin' foolish," said Red, tying the bundle to his saddle-strings. "Them clo'es stay with me till we're across the line."

Skinner proved a clever guide. It was down this cañon and up that, follow a creek-bed for a mile or two, then across and up the rocks of a slide where a single stumble would have written *finis* for the stumbler, through woods of pine and cedar where the wind soughed mournfully and no birds sang, across sun-drenched boggy meadows grown up in rank, high grass that brushed the riders' knees, over bare ridges and through dry wastes they rode without a halt, to the pain and anguish of Skinner, who called upon his gods to witness that he was becoming more saddle-sore by the minute, till they came at last to the creek that marked the boundary line between the State and the Territory.

They threshed across in a swirl of eddies and pushed on a good five miles before stopping to make camp.

"Ol' Skinner ain't such a hell-devil after all," said Red, sliding to the ground and stretching his legs. "We didn't see a sight o' them fellers once, an' Bill Doran musta told 'em which way we went. We're obliged to yuh, Skinner."

"I'll be obliged if yuh'll take off this rope an' gimme them clo'es," grumbled Skinner.

"Why, shore," assented Red cheerfully. "Tom, will yuh take off the gent's halter?"

Skinner dismounted and proceeded immediately to

finger with the utmost tenderness various parts of his anatomy.

"I'm raw like a skinned cow," he complained. "They ain't no skin left inside my knees, an' my shoulders is all sunburned to hellengone."

"That's shore tough," sympathized Red. "Here's yore clo'es."

He tossed to Skinner what appeared to be an ancient checked calico wrapper and a sunbonnet. Appearances were not deceptive. They were a calico wrapper and a sunbonnet. Skinner spread them out upon the ground and stared at them in anguish and dismay.

"My pants!" he moaned. "Wasn't they no pants in that bundle?"

"Nary a pant," Red shook his head.

"They was my blue flannel shirt on the outside a-wrappin' these here up," insisted Skinner. "I seen it."

"Shore they was a shirt. Here she is."

Cursing under his breath, Skinner ducked his head into the tail of the shirt and pulled it on.

"I don't see why yuh didn't get my clo'es," he fretted. "They was hangin' right in plain sight on the chair by my bunk, an' that fool wrapper an' sunbonnet is the other suit o' Bill Doran's breed cook, which she's went to town for the day, an' they was hangin' in the kitchen behind the stove. You got my shirt all right. Why — "

"Maybe I wanted to see how you'd look in woman's clo'es," interrupted Red without a trace of a smile.

"I won't put 'em on," gurgled Skinner.

"That's all right too. Ride in yore shirt-tail for all I care. But that wrapper an' sunbonnet is all the clo'es yo're gonna get for awhile, an' you can stick a pin in that."

"Ain't yuh gonna turn me loose now?"

"Not now —— not by a jugful we ain't. We like yore

company, Skinner, an' we aim to keep yuh for a spell where we can look at yuh."

The wretched Skinner dropped his eyes to the wrapper and the sunbonnet. Then, swiftly stooping, he rolled the two together into a compact bundle and sat down upon it with a gusty groan.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

A PLEASANT EVENING

After supper they lashed Skinner hand and foot an fore and aft between two trees and withdrew to a distance. All this at the instance of Bert Kinzie who had whispered to Red during the ride from the Empire that what he had to say was not for the ears of Skinner.

"They's a warrant out for yuh," Bert Kinzie said without preliminary.

"Both of us?" Red cocked an expectant eyebrow.

"Both of yuh."

Tom swore frankly.

"There," he snarled, turning on his brother, "I told yuh so!"

"Shut up. Le's hear the rest of it."

Red nodded to Bert Kinzie.

"She's thisaway," said the puncher. "Last night, when we got Hudson safe across the line to Sparksburg, we bedded him down in the jug an' went to the hotel ourselves. She's kind o' late, but the barkeep says another gent's gettin' grub, an' we can eat. The other gent turns out to be Kansas Casey. First thing he asks us have we seen you two. I kicks Bill under the table to keep his trap shut, an' I told Kansas we ain't, 'cause they's a look in Casey's eye I don't like.

"We get to talkin' an' she all comes out fine as frawg's hair in August. They's warrants out against both of yuh — Red for bustin' into the jail an' unhobblin' Lenton, an' Tom for helpin' Red an' arson."

"Arson!" Tom repeated blankly. "Who's he — this Arson?"

"Arson ain't a feller, she's only law language for burnin' up anythin'. They seem to think Tom set fire to his barn so's to keep folks away from the calaboose."

"The idjits!" exclaimed Red, irritated to learn that Farewell was capable of coördinated thought. "The —— —— idjits!"

"That's what I told Kansas," said Bert Kinzie, looking steadily at Red, "but he's sort o' got the notion you two gents are in Flipup."

"I wonder why."

"He seems to think you'd do anythin' to clear Lenton of that murder charge, an' Flipup is shore the likeliest place to begin."

"Yeah." Red scratched his chin. "Ain't he the li'l hellion?" he muttered.

"'Course, he couldn't take yuh back with him, but he didn't figger on no trouble about havin' yuh held till he could extradite yuh. He wasn't feelin' none too good at havin' to arrest yuh, I'll say that for him. But yuh know Kansas. The silver star means a lot to him. Well, when I heard all I needed to know, I borrowed a fresh hoss an' slid out early in the mornin' on the back trail, an' I guess Kansas musta suspicioned somethin' 'cause he drifts out, too, an' I seen him a-humpin' after me maybe a couple o' miles back. I got fieldglasses, and I could tell it's him. You better believe I rode. I outrun him to Flipup all right, but I lost one lot of time before I found out which trail yuh took out o' town. Lucky they wasn't nobody else takin' that trail or I'd a lost yore tracks at the fork. My Gawd, I was in a sweat, 'cause I knowed Kansas wouldn't lose no time, an' he ain't no slouch of a trailer himself. Well, I gotta be siftin' along back to Sparksburg."

He arose and stretched his arms crackingly.

"Just out o' spite now, Bert," said Red Kane. "I'll do you a good turn some day. I guess me'n Tom are a heap obliged to yuh."

"That's all right. No call to be obliged. Didn't you head off Skinner from drillin' me? Well then, whatcha talkin' about?"

"Just a shake, Bert. Who swore out them warrants?"

"Buck Saylor, Lumley an' Billy Bruff."

"Why you lookin' so happy?" Tom demanded savagely of his brother. "You might — Look at him! Look at the poor fool, Bert! He's laughin'! He's laughin' fit to split!"

"Who wouldn't laugh," chortled Red, pounding his leg in glee. "Buck Saylor! Of course it would be Buck. I might 'a' guessed it. Buck Saylor shore explains a lot o' things."

"Then s'pose you explain a few," snapped Tom. "I'd just like to know what's what, bein's I'm like to be arrested most any time now."

"Wait till I work her all out. Yo're takin' Hudson to Farewell, ain't yuh, Bert?"

"Shore. He'll have to go there first before goin' back to Marysville."

"In a hurry?"

"Why?"

"We'd take it as a favor, if yuh'd use up two weeks gettin' to Farewell. How about it?"

"Shore. What's two weeks between friends? Anythin' else?"

"If yuh could manage to see he stays in Farewell a week before he's sent south, it would give us a li'l more time in case — in case — just in case."

"Gawd he knows what yo're drivin' at, Red, I don't. But I'll do my best to have Hudson stay in Farewell a week. Look out for Kansas now. He's one perseverin'

gent in pants, an' yuh can put down a bet on that. So long."

Tom Kane watched Bert Kinzie mount his horse and ride away. Then he sat back on his heels, drew a long breath and opened his mouth.

"Don't say it," urged his brother. "This ain't no time to be humorous."

"Humorous!" exploded Tom. "Humorous! Which you make me so hot I could feed you wolf-pisen! Of all the damfools I ever see yo're shore the damfoolest! You an' yore bright li'l plan for turnin' Ben Lenton loose has got us in a fine tangle, a fi-ine tangle. Oh, yes, says you, it'll work out all same fallin' off a log, but you didn't say the log might be standin' straight up an' they might be ropes round our necks to keep us from fallin' too far. No, you didn't say nothin' about that. Not a word. I s'pose you thought that crowd o' hard-ridin' Flipup folks was somethin' to laugh at, huh? Well, it didn't tickle me, not a solitary tickle. An' —"

"Aw, whatsa matter with yuh?" interrupted Red. "You act as if yore neck was the only neck in the world."

"I still gotta see the neck I'd like better," countered Tom. "An' I'm aimin' to keep it fit to breathe through. An' I got a business in Farewell, too. Maybe you've forgot that. How'm I gonna go back? How's either of us gonna go back, I'd like to know? Can't yuh do nothin' but sit there like a fatheaded mud-turtle an' snicker? This here is serious, you saddle-galled idjit, serious."

"Shore, she's serious," admitted Red. "I can see that."

"Oh, you can, huh? You see they's somethin' in this, do yuh? That's fine, that is. Might I ask, if she ain't too much, now that yuh see we're out on a limb an' the bear a-waitin', what yo're gonna do about it?"

"You can ask," said Red, inhaling the smoke of a cigarette with a placidity that made Tom yearn to smite

him. "You can do that, of course. But why worry, Tom? Why worry?"

"Why worry? Why worry?"

"Shore, ain't I here?"

"An' I wish you was some'ers else, an' had stayed there ten years an' was countin' on stayin' ten years longer. I ain't got the words to tell you what I think o' yuh."

"Don't try. Yuh might choke. Listen — an' stop cussin'. Yo're beginnin' to repeat yoreself anyhow, so yuh might's well — Listen, will yuh? They ain't no danger of our not callin' the turn. Get that through yore thick head an' be happy."

"Howja know that?" Tom demanded unbelievingly.

"Well, we might have one chance in twenty o' losin'," qualified Red. "But what's one in twenty? Why, no risk at all. I'll get us out o' this too easy. Leave it to me, cowboy, leave it to me."

"Huh! Might 'a' knowed yuh didn't know what yuh was talkin' about. Leave it to you! Ain't I been a-leavin' it to you, an' look what's happened. Look what's happened!"

"Yo're millin' again. Sign yo're gettin' old or losin' yore peanut of a mind or somethin'. Listen, I got a plan."

"Another one!"

"Shore. I —"

"You'n me are gonna part right here. Plans! Plans! Plans! You don't introduce me to no more plans, not while I got my health!"

"Si'down an' shut up. I tell yuh I got four aces an' a joker that'll back them warrants plumb off the table into the stove."

Tom sat.

. . . . . .

"It don't sound possible," Tom said musingly.

"It is possible," flared Red. "Can't yuh see how it is?"

"I didn't mean that. What bogs me down is how yuh puzzled her all out thataway. You don't look like yuh got brains. Still, yuh can't never tell — Leggo! Leggo! What yuh tryin' to do — sprain my ankle? Stop foolin', will yuh? They's Skinner a-hollerin'. What's he want?"

"Stop yore yowlin'," Red commanded crossly, his fingers busy with the knots in Skinner's bonds.

"I guess you'd yowl, too," snarled Skinner. "You jiggers tied me down right over a ant-hill, an' the ants are riotin' all up an' down my back. Somethin' crawled into my ear too."

"Don't yuh care —— it'll crawl out soon's it finds out where it is. An' the sun's near down, an' then the ants'll go home to bed, so yuh really got nothin' to bother yuh a-tall. Yo're shore the most peevish party I ever see. There, yo're loose. Sit up an' be happy. Here's the makin's."

"I'd a whole lot rather have a pair of pants," fretted Skinner, nevertheless taking the proffered tobacco and papers. "Ain't you got even a pair of overalls in yore warbags?"

"Lordy no. What yuh take us for — drygoods stores?"

"I might as well be naked, gents. My underclo'es is all tore an' wore to frazzles."

"Don't apologize," Red told him kindly. "Tom an' me don't mind."

"I ain't apologizin'," denied the aggrieved Skinner, shaking a frowsy head. "But I don't like livin' like Adam nohow — too many gnats."

"They's that wrapper an' sunbonnet. What more yuh want? Lookit, if you say pants again, yuh don't get no more smokin'. You got a shirt on, a good shirt, an', if

you sit down cross-legged, it'll cover up most o' yuh, an' then the gnats won't have quite such a picnic."

"Why shouldn't they have a picnic?" Tom queried meaningly.

"That's so," said Red. "I never thought o' that. Them gnats are shore gonna be a help. Skinner, take off yore shirt."

But Skinner would not, so they incontinently worried him out of it. Now, reduced anew to desperation and his nether garments, he would have donned the despised calico wrapper. But this they would not allow.

Skinner gloomily flung grass and green branches on the fire for the purpose of creating a smudge and squatted down to choke and splutter in the rolling coils of smoke. Tom, a Winchester across his knees, kept an eye on Skinner.

"Smudge don't keep off all them gnats, does it?" Red observed cheerfully as Skinner slapped and slapped again the outlying regions of his anatomy. "If you was thinner now, you wouldn't mind 'em so much. They say they's no feelin' in bone. Must be kind o' smothery settin' there in all that smoke. I don't guess it's real good for the lungs. Lordy, Skinner, yuh sound just like a drum when yuh crack yoreself thataway. Can yuh beat the long roll, I wonder? Yuh can't? Well, it don't matter. Gnats gettin' thicker, huh? They will with night comin' on. Yo're due to be one busy li'l feller, Skinner. About that question now — Who was it killed Dick Lenton?"

Skinner clamped a stubborn jaw, turned his back and slapped away.

"You'll get tired o' that after a while," continued the drawling voice. "Them gnats are shore active. Tom, I don't guess we'll have to use the knife on him after all."

"No," replied Tom with a serious face. "I guess not."

"An' how," pursued Red, turning back to Skinner, "did Bill Doran come to get Dick Lenton's shotgun?"

There was no reply from Skinner.

"Listen here," Red went on persuasively, "I'm flat-footin' my bets on you, Skinner. When I seen that shotgun, I kind o' thought Bill Doran could help me out. But Flipup spoiled that, an' you was elected again. Skinner, you ain't gonna blight my young life by keepin' yore face shut forever, are yuh? Shake yore head for 'No.' Stubborn — stubborn's a mule, an' gittin' a sull on, too. Tom, I'll match yuh for first watch."

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

SKINNER IS REASONED WITH

It may be said that Skinner passed a bad night. The gnats seemed to become thicker and more active as the hours dragged on. Red-eyed and bitten in more places than he cared to think about, Skinner saw the sun rise clear. It promised a fine day, a most glorious day, but there was no joy in the heart of Skinner. He looked upon the form of the sleeping Tom and ground his teeth. Red looked upon Skinner and closed one eye.

"Yuh know, Skinner," he remarked in a casual tone, "I'd tell who killed Dick Lenton if I was you."

The reply was a curse — to be precise, three curses. But these lacked spontaneity. Observing which and the haggard weariness of Skinner's expression, Red was moved to grin.

"Lordy," he drawled, "them li'l gnats must 'a' been right busy last night. You look sort of blistery in spots — a whole lot of spots. Wait till the sun strikes 'em, old settler. You'll shore wish you'd been a better boy."

"You'll gimme my shirt back, won't yuh?" Skinner asked uneasily.

"Not to-day nor yet to-morrow. The day after, maybe. I'll have to think about it."

"But I tore my undershirt all down the back last night tryin' to get at one o' them gnats," wailed Skinner, aghast at the prospect. "I gotta wear somethin'. Gimme that calico wrapper; I'll wear that."

"You won't even wear the sunbonnet, Skinner."

"But I can't go round this way alla time!" Skinner's red eyes fairly popped with dismay.

"Oh, alla time is somethin' else again. We're talkin' about now. But I'll tell yuh what, feller, if yore troubles get too hard, I'll let yuh wear that calico wrapper an' sunbonnet."

Anon they proceeded. But without haste. As Red confided to Skinner, "We got all the time they is." Which was no doubt why in the course of the morning they traveled consecutively north, east, south and west.

"This sun is killin' me," moaned Skinner. "Why yuh got to follow these dry washes alla time? They's some shade over there by them trees. Why can't we go that way? An' where yuh goin' anyway? We ain't done nothin' since sun-up but head first this way an' then that way like lost tender — Ouch!"

The exclamation was called forth by Skinner's inadvertently resting a sunburned forearm on the brass horn of his saddle.

"Horn kind o' hot, huh?" drawled Red. "It would be. Lordy, man, yo're red as the brand on a Wild Rose tomatter can. When them li'l gnat jiggers come scatterin' over yuh tonight, you'll have a party."

"Yo're torturin' me," declared Skinner.

"Never a torture. We wouldn't torture yuh. Ain't I told yuh we wouldn't? You can take my word. It's them gnats an' the sunshine. We can't help it if them gnats think yo're good to eat. It ain't our fault if they don't know no better. An' we can't help the sun, can we?"

"You can gimme a shirt or that wrapper!" cried the goaded Skinner, trembling in the saddle with varied emotions.

"Now that's just what we can't do," said Red warmly. "Can we, Tom?"

"Lordy, no! it wouldn't be right nohow."

"So that's how it is, Skinner. Neither Tom nor me sees how we can help yuh out without yuh tell us what we wanna know about Dick Lenton's killer, an' also how Bill Doran come to have Dick Lenton's shotgun. We gotta know them things, Skinner. We just gotta, an' yuh can stick a pin in that."

Skinner stiffened a sore back and gazed straight ahead. Red winked at Tom.

"He's weakenin'," he said in a half-whisper.

"I ain't!" yapped Skinner. "I'll never tell!"

"Root hog or die, feller, root hog or die. Who killed Dick Lenton? Was it you or Lumley or Bruff or Usher? Who done it?"

Skinner gritted his teeth and clenched his hands. His nerve was not yet shattered.

"That wrapper," observed Red, "would shore keep some o' the sun off. So would the sunbonnet. Does the back of yore neck hurt, Skinner? I wonder is he in danger o' sunstroke, Tom. Whadda yuh think?"

"Not so long's we keep movin' he ain't."

A remarkably tough bird was Skinner.

He did not weaken throughout that long hot summer day. When they stopped to camp for the night, he dismounted with a painful stiffness that would have been pitiable in a less reprehensible member of society. As it was, Red nodded approvingly. Another day or two, he decided, would call the turn and call it correctly. Tom was not so sanguine. Skinner was displaying uncommon fortitude. The pain of his bites and burns must have been agonizing.

Red had chosen the camp site with admirable discrimination. The gnats were present in clouds. They fell upon the puffy Skinner with promptitude and avidity. They even proved annoying to Red and Tom.

That night Skinner endeavored to run away. Red, on guard that watch, let him run. This greatly to the sur-

prise of Skinner, who had expected to be shot at. A moment later Skinner, bounding like a frightened coyote under the pale light of the dry new moon, dashed into a patch of what appeared to be high grass but was really a dense and healthy growth of young briars.

A sinuous tendril as thick as a lead pencil and armed with thorns by the dozen wrapped itself round the ankle of Skinner and jerked him down. Oh, it was then that he yelled and swore and floundered.

Red, strolling up a moment later, seized him by the hair and yanked him out of that. Skinner, sore, scratched, his skin a living fire, aching in every bone, sat up and blinked at Red.

"Thought I wasn't watchin' yuh, didn't yuh?" observed Red, his hands folded over the muzzle of his Winchester. "You poor idjit, whadda yuh guess I sat down by that bullsap an' began to nod for? Just so yuh'd try to pull yore freight. Knowed yuh would. Knowed yuh'd run this way. Only way open for yuh to run. An' these briars so nice an' handy. Funny yuh didn't notice 'em like I done while we was makin' camp."

Slowly two great fat tears oozed from Skinner's eyes and furrowed their way down his dirty cheeks. With a grunting cry he flopped over on his side, hid his face in his hands and began to sob.

It is no pleasant thing to witness the weeping of a man — even such a man as Skinner. Red sucked in his under-lip, his brows drawing together. He would have preferred to be merciful, but there are times when mercy is out of place. This was one of those times. He called to his sleeping brother.

Between them they dragged the now hysterical Skinner back to camp. They tied him to a tree and soused him with many hatfuls of water.

"Now or never," said Red when Skinner showed signs of emerging from his emotional paroxysm. "If he don't

snitch now after all he's gone through, he's a howlin' wizard."

"Which he ain't," declared Tom. "Hop to it."

Red sank down on one heel in front of the bound man. The thin moonlight slanted across Skinner's face and body. He was a most unlovely object.

"Skinner," said Red, "who killed Dick Lenton?"

Skinner merely rolled his eyes. Red repeated the question. Skinner dropped his chin forward on his breast. His lumpy jaw-muscles hardened. Monotonously Red repeated the question. But never a word said Skinner. Till Red's throat became dry and his voice husky, he put the question to Skinner at ten-second intervals. Then he gave way to Tom. When Tom tired, Red took on the job again. Still Skinner held out.

Suddenly Red changed his line of questioning.

"Skinner," said he, "tell me how Art Teller got hold of Dick Lenton's three-diamond ring?"

Skinner came alive with a jerk.

"Say — say that again!" he cried.

"Tell me how Art Teller come to get Dick Lenton's three-diamond ring."

"How d'yuh know Art's got it?"

"He ain't got it. He had it. I took it off him. Here it is. Ever see it before?"

Red, having extracted the ring from the inner pocket where it lay, held it up between his thumb and forefinger. The moonshine struck tiny sparks of greenish fire from the three diamonds.

Skinner's puffed eyes glowered at the ring. He gulped. He gulped again. Then he cursed Art Teller with passionate intensity. He likewise cursed several other people, of whom presently.

"He told me that ring was lost, the lousy liar!" declared Skinner at the tail of his tirade.

"Who told you?" Red asked quickly.

"That rat Teller! Who do yuh s'pose? He skun me out o' that ring! It was gonna be my share!" Thus Mr. Skinner in part. Most of his remarks were unprintable.

Red tucked away the ring, squatted down on his heel and awaited the end in patience. When it came, he said gently:

"You might tell the rest of it, Skinner. You've done pretty well already."

"Gimme a drink an' that female wrapper an' slack off this rope that's cuttin' me in half, an' I will," bargained Skinner. "Skun me, the dirty skunk! I'll show him! My Gawd," he added, as Red eased off a turn, "my Gawd, what a relief!"

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

THE REAPER

Mr. Art Teller, dozing in the shade of a neatly built cabin at the back of a high ridge, snapped wide-awake of a sudden. Was that the crackle of dry brush? He wondered. He got up quietly, slid into the cabin and reconnoitered the forest from the back window. He saw nothing. The peace of ages was over the landscape. He waited five minutes. Then, hearing nothing, he returned to the outer air — and the muzzle of a six-shooter. Red Kane was behind that muzzle.

Art Teller thrust both hands aloft without being told. Red ordered his victim to face about and separated him from his weapons.

"We meet again," said Red Kane. "Next time, Arthur, when you hear a funny noise off in the woods, you'd better make trail without waitin' a second. You did hear a funny noise in the woods, didn't yuh? That was Tom playin' tricks on yuh. Here he comes now."

"Who's that with him — a woman? What — why, it's Skinner! He's snitched! He's snitched on me!"

"You hadn't oughta held out the ring on him, Artie. That wasn't square. That was tinhorn work an' one big mistake. Whadda yuh know about Skinner that the sheriff would like to know? He snitched on you, Artie. Now you snitch on him. What could be fairer than that?"

Red beamed expansively upon Art Teller. The latter glowered. He shifted his feet. Red, realizing that

Teller was a wily and resourceful person, stepped back a yard.

"I wouldn't," he advised gently. "Yo're quick, but you ain't quick enough. I — just — wouldn't. Was you gonna tell me anythin' about Skinner?"

"Lots o' time for that," said Art Teller, a convulsive tremor rippling across his wizened face. "Later I might tell yuh a lot."

"Any time, any time."

"Can I put my hands down now. You got my gun, an' my elbows hurt."

"Take 'em down. I'm watchin' yuh."

Arrived then Tom Kane and the wrappered Skinner. Art Teller did not curse Skinner. He merely stood and glared at him. The landlord promptly began to swear and call Teller names.

"You measly Judas," said Teller, lifting his right hand and slowly scratching the angle of his jaw, "whadda yuh think yo're gettin' out o' this?"

"Never you mind," said Skinner triumphantly. "I ain't gonna be hung anyway."

At the tail of the words Art Teller's hand, the one that had been so innocently rubbing his jaw, flashed to the back of his neck and flashed forward again with equal, uncanny speed. Followed a twinkle in the air, a whir, a cough, and Skinner was down, a ten-inch bowie transfixing his throat.

It must not be supposed that in the above situation Red remained idle. He was quick, but the knife-haft had left Art Teller's hand the veriest fraction of a second before Red's bullet shattered the bones of the palm.

Art Teller sat down calmly on a bench beside the cabin door. He held his right wrist with his left hand and gazed with satisfaction upon Skinner sobbing his life away on the grass.

"Takin' the knife out won't help him any," sneered

Art Teller. "He said he wouldn't be hung, an' I guess for once he spoke the truth. Judas!"

Art Teller lifted his upper lip and spat upon the ground. Willingly Tom could have killed him where he sat. Skinner, the star witness, indeed the only one willing to give evidence before a court, dying! In two minutes he would be dead. But there Tom was at fault. Skinner lasted out three and a half.

Tom — he had been kneeling beside Skinner — got slowly to his feet. He planted his hands on his hips and gazed balefully and contemptuously at his brother.

"I don't guess now," he said with scorn, "you ever heard of a gent packin' a bowie under the back of his vest. Yo're the sport who yawped his head off 'cause Hollister hid out a derringer on me, ain't yuh? Ain't yuh, huh? An' here yuh let this jigger keep a ten-inch knife right where he can get at it handiest. An' look what he done with it! This is a fine note!"

Red, contrite and inwardly castigating himself for a purblind fool, attempted no excuses. In silence he washed, plugged and bandaged Art Teller's wounded hand. When he had completed the task and stepped back, Art Teller lifted up his pale eyes, an unpleasant grin on his wizened face.

"I s'pose you was gonna use Skinner for a witness," said he. "Sort o' figurin' on that, wasn't yuh? Yeah, I guess you was. Well, you won't make me do no talkin' the way yuh made that snitch of a Skinner."

"Won't we?" said Red. "That's shore tough. Have to do the best we can without yuh, I expect."

"An' that won't be much."

"Won't it? Outside of yore bein' stretched a-plenty, looks like you win, don't it?"

Art Teller grunted and spat. The prospect of the rope did not seem to feaze him. His was a hardened soul.

They spent the remainder of the day and that night at

the cabin. For the horses required rest, and there was excellent feed in the mountain meadow between the cabin and the forest.

Supper's bacon and coffee disposed of, Art Teller was roped to his bunk for the night and the brothers lay down on the grass beyond ear-shot of the cabin, there to smoke and wrangle whisperingly.

"An' we was bettin' on Skinner to get us shut o' this muss," snarled Tom, pinching out a half-smoked cigarette. "Now we gotta go to work all over again on this jigger."

"An' this jigger's a different breed o' dog. He ain't soft like Skinner. I guess now Brad made a mistake when he said Teller would be more meachin' than Square-Face Higby. Meachin'! The way he slung that knife wasn't meachin' nohow. I'm tellin' yuh, Tom, unless we treat Teller to a two-legged dose of warwhoop big medicine he won't talk. Me, I thought I could manage that all right if I had to, but after watchin' Skinner an' them gnats, I'm free to admit I know I can't. So —"

"Yeah. Well?" prompted Tom.

Red did not immediately reply. He rolled over on his back and looked up at the stars of the evening a-wink above the mountains.

"I'll tell yuh," he said after a space, "Skinner would 'a' been a help. I ain't denyin' it. But we can manage without him."

"We! We! Which yo're takin' too much for granted. I dunno nothin' about no 'we' whatever. Yo're a-doin' this. You can have all the credit, yuh betcha. I'm free to admit the closer I get to that warrant the less I'm shore yore scheme without Skinner is any good."

"You gotta admit even without him my plan's got its points."

"So has a cow's horns, a paper o' pins an' a barb-wire

fence. Speakin' personal, yore scheme reminds me mostly o' the fence. We're snagged so good an' plenty."

"Aw, shut up! You act like it was all my fault! S'pose we are arrested. They can't hold us very long."

"Very long! Very long! Great Goddlemighty! Can't hold us very long! Them's the very words the lawyer sharp told the jigger in jail, an' the poor chunk got twenty year! Nemmine argufyin'! I'm through listenin' to you! Bad luck! Nothin' but! First the warrant, an' now Skinner. Aw right, aw right, g'on. You can't make me think no different, but I'll listen if it does yuh any good."

Red did his utmost to convince his brother that Skinner's demise did not necessarily signify the upsetting of their apple-cart. But stubborn as one of his own mules was Tom, a very Covenanter in his convictions. He remained pessimistic no matter what Red said. Even Red's taking the first watch out of turn left him cold.

Red entered the cabin and inspected with a hard eye Mr. Teller and his fastenings. He came out, picked up his rifle, levered home a cartridge and carefully lowered the hammer to the safety notch.

He slumped down on the grass near Tom and began to play one-handed mumblypeg without the peg. Having successfully three consecutive times tossed "Jack-in-the-blanket" he made no move to pluck the knife out of the ground, but sat looking at it with a set and serious face. A wrinkle of worry creased the skin between his eyebrows. Then he scowled at nothing and spoke in a low voice.

"What yuh swearin' for?" queried the mildly surprised Tom.

"I'm gettin' nervous."

Tom's mild surprise changed abruptly to amazement. Never in his life had he heard Red talk like that and in that tone.

"Whadda yuh mean by nervous, an' nervous o' what?"

"Dot Lenton."

"Maybe she'll give yuh the mitten after all," Tom said hopefully.

"Don't look on the bright side so hard," snarled Red. "I ain't worryin' none about that. It's Brad Usher an' that sheriff an' his man."

"Didn't yuh tell her to watch herself an' stay round town all she could? Didn't yuh tell Telescope to pass the word to Jake — "

"Natur-ally. I ain't a complete fool. You heard me tell Telescope yoreself. But she's venturesome, Tom. She'll think it's her duty to look after the ranch an' the horses while her old man's away, an' she'll do it — an' them three devils wouldn't want a better chance than that."

"They wouldn't have the gall to touch her — not in Fort Creek County. Which they'd be lynched so high the eagles would build nests in their whiskers."

"Remember 'Cutnose' Canter an' 'Rime' Tolliver over at Mocassin Spring on Soogan Creek. They didn't think nothin' of no lynchin'. I'd like to know what would 'a' happened to Jane Dale if Chuck Morgan hadn't arrove when he did."

"Nothin' like — Why, lookit — Dot can look out for herself, that girl. Jane Dale was a Easterner from Kansas. Dot Lenton is a old-timer in this country, an' don't you forget it. She's safe. Besides, them hosses of ours can't go no farther without eight hours rest, if that's what yo're thinkin' about."

"S'pose now she's in trouble," Red persisted doggedly.

"Say, yo're stewin' up all of a sudden, seems to me. You didn't — "

"It just struck me all of a heap like, Tom. I — I keep thinkin' they's somethin' up. I dunno why. But I do."

"Feel it in yore bones, huh?"

"Sort of, yeah."

"I knowed it. You got the rheumatics. That's what you got. Like Uncle Jake an' the Minié ball he got in his leg a-fightin' with Pap Price's Arkansawyers. He was always prophesyin' rain by the way the leg hurt, an' he was wrong as the leg was nine times out o' ten. So you got no cause to get all sweated up. Most likely yo're wrong, too. What yuh rarin' about now? Ain't I tryin' to cheer yuh up? Aw right, then, if yuh wanna go on the prod, go on the prod some'ers away from me an' lemme sleep."

Much to the disgust of Tom, Red insisted on an early start.

"If we pull our freight too fast an' soon," protested Tom, sitting up and rubbing the sleep from his eyes, "we'll get there before Bill an' Bert do."

"It don't matter none," Red told him decisively. "We're goin' home just as fast as our hosses can last it."

It is unnecessary to detail the ride north. Suffice it to say that they pushed their horses to the utmost and, save in one instance when Red made a solitary detour to Damson and Blossom on the railroad, avoided inhabited places. They made more than one dry camp, and at the last were reduced for rations to the squirrel — pine, red and ground. This last to the disrelish of Mr. Teller.

"I don't mind so much bein' glommed on to thisaway," he stated, having picked clean the frame of a fat piney. "I been arrested before, so that's all right, but I don't care nothin' about grubbin' on chipmunks, none whatever. Which if I gotta eat any more o' these tree-climbin' mice, I'll shore begin a-chatterin' an' a-growin' fur."

They wasted no sympathy on the peevish Mr. Teller, but whisked him north with the briskest haste.

On an evening Jimmie, the Bar S cook, was mixing bread for the night's setting and singing that mournful-

est of songs, "The Mormon Bishop's Lament", when there came a scratching at the cook-shack's open door. Instantly Jimmie ceased his wailing and cocked a listening ear.

"It's me, Red," whispered a familiar voice. "Where's Telescope?"

"C'mon in," Jimmie urged. "I can't leave this bread. They's nobody here, only me."

"I'm doin' fine outside," was the cautious response. "You never know who's snoopin' round. Tell me where Telescope is?"

"Don't you know they's a warrant out for you an' Tom too? An' —"

"Shore, I know all that. I read the papers every day. Where's Telescope? How many times yuh want me to ask yuh?"

"He's in the bunk-house. Lookit here, Red, what yuh aimin' to do? They's a posse out after yuh an' everythin'."

"Ain't that awful. I'm scared to death. Hear me shiver. Go an' get Telescope for me, will yuh, an' keep yore trap shut?"

"I don't blat," was the huffy return. "I ain't no sheep. I guess I got some sense. We're all with yuh anyway. Shucks, what if yuh did turn Lenton loose? It was fine business, an' them squirts from Rock County got what was comin'. Say, wasn't they hot? I should say so. Rarin' an' hollerin' round what they was gonna do to yuh when they caught yuh. Oh, they was wild as a nest o' rattlers. Aw, I'm goin', I'm goin'. Bread's all ready to set. Just a shake till I cover her. Yes, sir," pursued Jimmie, warming anew to his subject, "that Sheriff Lumley man was mad enough to chew nails. But he hadn't no manner o' business or right arrestin' that girl."

At this a whirlwind burst into the kitchen and a cant-hook grip clutched Jimmie by the shoulder.

"What's that you said?" demanded a terrible voice.

Jimmie twisted his head to face two blazing eyes.

"You rousy idjit!" he cried. "I didn't arrest her!"

Thus recalled to himself Red let go and stood back.

"Get Telescope!" he said harshly.

Red, seething inwardly with the knowledge of what had happened to Dot, followed the cook outdoors and sat down on the wash-bench. His fingers closed down and clenched on the edge of the two-inch board that formed the seat. Dot Lenton arrested! Jammed into the calaboose like a horse thief! He felt a turbulent horror, a biting rage such as one feels who witnesses the profaning of a high altar.

Indeed, for that matter, she was his high altar, his goddess, his sign and symbol of all things good and beautiful.

"Git a-hold of yoreself, you pop-eyed coot!" he told himself through clamped teeth. "This ain't no time to blow up! No time a-tall! If she's arrested, you'll need all yore fool brains, every last brain!"

From the bunk-house then came Telescope and Jimmie. Red, taking with him the half-breed, promptly faded into the darkness. Jimmie retired to the cook-shack and angrily put to soak the morning's beans.

"They needn't have rushed off thataway," he muttered, retying the sack. "I wasn't gonna listen."

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

THE BARGAIN

Jake Rule, sheriff of Fort Creek County, sat in his home at Farewell and gnawed his nether lip. He always gnawed the said lip when worry and the well-known carking care oppressed his being. At present he was very much oppressed. The governor of the Territory had written him a letter stating in the most courteous of phraseology that as a sheriff he was no thief-catcher. The governor failed to understand why nothing had been done to make burglary and stage-robbing a risky means of livelihood. The governor viewed with alarm the amazing lethargy obtaining among the duly constituted officers of the law. The governor begged to be permitted to point out that, while no sheriff had as yet been removed from office by reason of incompetency, it could be done. The above were, in part, the remarks of the governor.

Jake Rule knew that he and his deputy had done their human best to uphold the law and lay by the heels the transgressors thereof. But — the governor was the governor, and he undoubtedly could separate Jake Rule and his well-paid office. Fifteen cents per mile was the mileage allowed, and expense vouchers were never questioned by the complaisant treasurer.

Jake gloomily shifted his chew and shot an accurate stream of tobacco juice into the cuspidor. He did not know what to do, and it was necessary that something be done — and quickly.

Sounded a rapping upon the door and, when the door was opened, there stood Telescope.

"Mornin', Sher'f," said the half-breed, and he looked meaningly at the door opening into the kitchen. "You alone?"

"Shore. The wife's gone down to the store — shoes for the kid or some such devilment."

Telescope entered, carefully closed the door, leaned a straight back against it and hooked his thumbs in his belt.

"You wan' for catch Red Kane?" he asked quietly.

The sheriff, who had resumed his seat, sprang out of it nimbly.

"Where is he?" he cried, lifting down his belt and six-shooter from the peg beside the ammunition company's calendar.

"No hurry," said Laguerre, more than a hint of amusement in the glint of his black eyes. "No hurry 'tall. I deed not say w'ere she was, me. I ask you was you wan' for catch heem."

"Is this a joke?" Severely.

"I have no time for joke. Eef you wan' for catch heem, you come wit' me — un leave you' gun home."

"Huh?"

"Red wan' for talk wit' you 'fore she surrendair. Mebbeso you not spleet even wit' heem, mebbeso she not surrendair. Eef you have not de gun, you can not stop heem."

Laguerre grinned toothfully at the astounded sheriff.

"You got a gall!" exclaimed Jake Rule.

The half-breed shrugged his shoulders. "Tak' eet or leave eet," said he calmly. "You do not know w'ere she ees, Red Kane. You have not arrest heem. S'pose you talk wit' him, s'pose she not surrendair you lose nothin' — you w'ere you ees now. S'pose she surrendair, you ween. You come wit' me, un you have nothin' for lose un all for ween."

The sheriff saw the logic in the argument.

"We-ell —" he began hesitantly.

"You leave you' gun, Sher'f. Eet weel be all right. I weel be wit' you. Dere weel be no shootin'. You are safe all same as me. Red, she say so. I say so. W'at more you wan' dan dat?"

"How far is the place where Red is?" probed the sheriff.

"Two mile — ten mile — how do I know?" parried Laguerre. "I have not de tape-measure wit' me."

"I'll go yuh," said Sheriff Rule.

An hour later Telescope Laguerre and Sheriff Rule rode into a narrow draw beyond the western end of Indian Ridge. Here, in a small cottonwood clump containing a spring, a gentleman in chaps was frying bacon. He and another gentleman, the latter bound in a seated posture to a cottonwood trunk, were eating the meat as fast as it was cooked.

The gentleman in chaps stood up at sight of the sheriff and smiled expansively. He balanced the frying-pan with its sizzling contents in one hand and indicated with the other the bound gentleman.

"Meet Art Teller of Flipup, Colorado, Sheriff," said he. "On the seventeenth in the afternoon over near Packer's Peak, this territory, he slung a knife at a gent named Skinner — I never did know his front handle — an' rubbed him out. Me'n' Tom are the witnesses. If you brought along a pair of handcuffs, I dunno but he'll find 'em more comfortable than that rope."

The sheriff blinked at Red's machine-gun delivery of the unexpected. He made no motion toward his saddle-pockets.

"Where's Tom?" he asked.

"Where you won't find him," grinned Red.

"What yuh wanna talk to me about?" Jake Rule asked impatiently.

"Oh, this an' that — a lot o' things. Have a piece o' bacon? . . . No? Makes all the more for Art an' me,

then. Tell yuh what, bacon shore tastes like more when yuh been livin' off squirrels without salt for three-four days. Last night, when I got to a salt sack, I just stuck my paw in, glommed on to a handful an' ate her dry-so. Here, Art, old-timer, here's the fryin'-pan where you can reach her."

"Gimme the makin's," snarled the amiable Art. "An' don't look so joyous. I ain't hung yet."

"That's so. Yo're still tied to that tree, ain't yuh? Curious they's so many different ways to use a rope, ain't it? Sheriff, don't yuh think throwin' the rope over a limb an' then just haulin' away is every bit as good as a reg'lar gallows an' a five-foot drop?"

"Tryin' to scare me, huh?" blared Teller, his wizened face wrinkling with his best sneer.

"I didn't ride alla way out here to gas about capital punishment," said the sheriff severely. "If you've got anythin' to say, say it."

"Shore, shore-ly," soothed Red. "While Telescope stays with Art, le's you'n me go off a li'l ways where the atmosphere's private. Lordy —" as the sheriff frowned —"what yuh balkin' at? What can I do to yuh that I couldn't 'a' done ever since you got here?"

As if he knew that the sheriff would follow, Red turned his back on him and walked out of the cotton-wood clump toward a dense growth of box-elders a hundred yards down the draw. Arrived at the fringe of the bushes, he sat down cross-legged and built himself a cigarette.

Two minutes later the sheriff rode up and dismounted.

"You could 'a' come along with me," said Red gently.

"I wanted to put the cuffs on the prisoner first," the sheriff explained sharply.

"I didn't know whether you'd take him prisoner or not — at first," drawled Red. "You looked kind o' funny — at first."

"You can take it I'm still lookin' a heap funnier than I feel. What's the layout?"

Red began to talk. Before he had been speaking five minutes, the sheriff's boredly apathetic expression had been altered to one of the liveliest interest. Red talked on. Occasionally the sheriff would cut in with a question. Often he would tug at his mustache and wink his eyes — a sure sign that he was pleased with whatever might be toward.

Red ceased speaking, pulled the last drag from his fourth cigarette and pinched out the stub. He did not remove his eyes from the sheriff's face.

"How about it?" he asked.

"It could be done," said Jake Rule. "An' then again — "

"I'm takin' that chance. But I ain't worryin'. It'll go through — like that."

He slapped the palm of one hand with the back of the other.

"Yeah?"

The sheriff pushed back his hat and scratched a grizzled head. Now that the tale had ended, he no longer tugged at his mustache or winked his eyes. He appeared doubtful.

"They's only one room an' two cells in the jail," he objected.

"Take the lady into yore own house for the night," snapped Red. "She should 'a' been there all along — if you had to arrest her. An' I'm sayin' right here that was one fool play."

"Speakin' for myself," said the sheriff equably, "I agree with yuh. But when Lumley swore out the warrant I hadda serve it. You can see that."

"I know, I know. Telescope told me all about it. Which it's shore healthy for Lumley an' his outfit they didn't bother her outside o' that, but that's enough.

Me'n them ain't through yet — not by no manner o' means. Take the lady into yore house, huh? What say?"

"Kind o' irregular."

"So's the whole deal irregular, but, if you wait to do it regular, whadda you get? You get Hollister — maybe. 'Cause in that case me'n' Tom are a heap likely to forget a whole lot of evidence, an' that won't help yore case none."

"You wouldn't do that." Uncomfortably.

"Wouldn't we? We would in a minute. An' you better believe that without us the evidence is a heap shacklin'. You do it the irregular way, Sheriff — you gotta remember they ain't nothin' strictly illegal about it — an' glom most o' the outfit. Make a name for yuh, Jake, that will. Oughta help yuh come next election."

"You'll get all the credit."

"Don't you fret; I'll give you half. If anybody asks me — an' I won't be none backward about tellin' 'em if they don't — you an' me worked her out between us. I guess that oughta show this county the sheriff ain't exactly a dumbhead mummy."

Sheriff Jake Rule glanced suspiciously at Red Kane. But the latter's expression was blank to innocence. The sheriff decided that Red was not, in the mention of the qualified mummy, endeavoring to perpetrate a blazer.

"We-ell —" he hedged.

"Now lookit, Jake, if yo're balkin' at the price, you needn't think I dug out the inside of all this for fun. When I went south to riddle out the Lenton killin', I wasn't even thinkin' of bringin' the Farewell express robbery into camp. But, now that I've got it all ready for you to run the brand on, I want what's right, an' yo're the gent to give it to me, yuh bet yuh."

The sheriff pondered this a moment.

"Aw right," he said presently, "if it works out at the hearin' just like you say it will, I'll fix it up with the judge about them warrants. He'll do what I tell him, I guess."

"Yes, I guess he will, seein' as you got him elected."

"Alla same, it's a hold-up, Red," fiddled the sheriff. "Yo're a-turnin' this express robbery to yore own use."

"Shore I am," Red corroborated heartily. "What did yuh think I was doin' with it?"

To this the sheriff could not arrange a satisfactory reply. He settled his hat more firmly on his head and spat upon the grass. "I guess we can do it," was his heavy pronouncement. "Shore," he added, throwing out his chest a trifle, "you an' me, between us we can swing it."

"Want me to go over it again?" inquired Red, suppressing with difficulty a quirk at the corner of his mouth.

"No." The sheriff shook his head and stood up. "I got a good memory myself," he added. "Soon as they get in with Hudson, I'll let you know. Naw, you bet I won't forget to bring Kansas."

"We'll be there, me an' Art," said Red Kane.

When the sheriff had ridden out of the draw, Tom, dragging a rifle, crawled out of the box-elders within ten feet of where the officer and his brother had held their conversation. He joined his brother in the cottonwood clump and poked him in the ribs with a hard forefinger.

"'You an' me,'" Tom quoted, "'between us we can swing it.' Oh, yes, indeedy. Bright feller, li'l Jakey Rule is. You watch yore eye, Reddy, now you hear me talkin', or you'll find yoreself turnin' handsprings on yore ear. Jake may shuffle the deck too much . . . Huh? No, not while I got my health, thank you most to death. I told you I had my own notion about givin' up. I still got the notion. If anythin' should happen, I wanna be

where I can lay hold of a gun prompt an' plenty. Yessir, that's me."

"I weel stay een town," said Telescope, "un I weel keep de eye peel, me. S'pose dem 88 boy een town. Dey weel raise hell, *bien sur.*"

"No need for you to mix into this, Telescope," said Red. "You told me comin' here the 88 hadn't locked horns with the Bar S on my account yet. Let 'em alone, an' it'll all damp out fine an' dandy. It's me an' Tom they want, an' they won't get me while Jake can lift a gun. An' Tom can take care of himself."

"Oh, shore, Tom can take care of himself," grunted the gentleman in question. "Tom's got it easy. He won't have nothin' to do but dodge over the landscape, look forty ways to once, keep out o' sight an' find out all that's goin' on in town. It's a cinch."

"Look what I gotta do!" cried Red indignantly. "I —" He broke off, his eye caught by the expression of intense interest on the face of Mr. Teller. "No," he continued in a more restrained tone, "I guess I ain't talkin' to-day no more."

On the morrow, between noon and one o'clock, Jake Rule came galloping on a lathered horse, shouting that John Hudson had arrived. A few minutes behind Jake rode Kansas Casey. The latter greeted Red with great cordiality.

"Foxed me good, didn't yuh?" said he, assisting Red to boost Art Teller across a saddle. "What did yuh do with yore trail after yuh left the Empire — eat it?"

"We didn't have much else to eat," grinned Red.

Within the hour Farewell was edified by the sight of its efficient sheriff bringing in a prisoner. The prisoner was Red Kane. He was hatless — he had for the sake of atmosphere stuffed his hat into a cantina — his hair was frowsily unkempt; he had not shaved since the Lord

knew when, and on his wrists sparkled a new and shiny pair of handcuffs.

To the immediate vicinity of Jake and his prisoner the town's inhabitants drew as steel filings to the magnet. Among the first to arrive were Usher, Billy Bruff and Lumley. They found Red arguing violently with the sheriff.

"I want a hearin' right now," he was insisting.

"You'll get it when I get good an' ready," returned the sheriff.

"Now, right now!" bawled Red. "This here's a injustice. I ain't gonna stay in no jail so's you can make money a-boardin' me. Nawsir, I ain't. I want a hearin', an' I want it immediate."

"You'll maybe get stretched immediate, young feller," called Billy Bruff, oozing triumph from every pore.

"I got a rope," said Lumley, his eyes gloatingly venomous.

Red, looking over the shoulders of the crowd, perceived on the outskirts the long horse-face and high hat of Bradley Usher. The face was expressionless. The jaws worked squirrel-wise. As their eyes met, Mr. Usher half smiled and passed a thumb across his lean throat.

Telescope Laguerre, a yard in Mr. Usher's rear, hitched up his chaps and stared woodenly. Red dropped his eyes to the faces of Bruff and Lumley.

"I hear you two made quite a picture," said he, "with yore hands tied behind yuh an' yore two heads jammed tight under the sash."

"I'm still laughin' last," flung back Lumley. "What say, gents, we take this sport over to the nearest cottonwood?"

It does not matter what manner of man he may be, a citizen, if he wishes, makes friends. The Rock County men had, during their sojourn in Farewell, attached to

themselves by the easy ties of drinking and gambling certain members of the loose-living caste. These individuals received with acclaim the suggestion of Mr. Lumley.

The sheriff dropped his hand to his gun-butt.

"This prisoner goes to jail," said he. "Anybody thinkin' different an' puttin' it in the form of a motion goes to the graveyard."

Bill Derr pushed his energetic way through the crowd. He was followed by Bert Kinzie and three of Bert's comrades of the 88 — to wit, Bill Allen of the freckled face, Slim Mack and Alonzo Peters, the latter known to his friends as "Crazy Lonzo." In the fight at the Sweetwater ranch-house Red Kane had perforated Slim Mack, and Tom Kane had at other times and places drilled holes in both Bill Allen and Crazy Lonzo. But now Slim Mack was grinning cheerily at Red, Bill Allen was shouting encouragement and Crazy Lonzo was swearing that what the sheriff said went, and he, Alonzo Peters, would be proud to see that it went.

Red Kane felt a warm glow expand within him. It was good to find friends — especially in that quarter. Red Kane had cast his bread upon the waters in that dark hotel dining-room, and now it had returned to him fourfold.

"Heart up, Reddy lad!" bawled a voice over the shoulder of Billy Bruff. "You got friends, an' don't yuh forget it!"

Mr. Bruff, turning to frown down his enemy's well-wisher, found himself gazing into the hard-bitten countenance of Mike Flynn, the peg-legged half-owner of the Blue Pigeon store. Mr. Bruff turned back to frown elsewhere and looked into the face of his chief, Tom Lumley. Billy Bruff asked a question with his eyes. Lumley shook his head slightly.

The sheriff, who, with his prisoner, had remained on

horseback in front of the jail till the crowd was packed solidly between it and them, raised his hand.

"Li'l air, gents, li'l air," he cried good-naturedly. "Move both ways an' lemme get this prisoner into the jug."

"Say, don't I get no hearin'?" protested Red in his loudest yell.

"You don't need no hearin'," snapped the sheriff. "Yo're guilty! Shut up!"

"Take more'n you to make me, old skimmerindink. I know my rights as a citizen of this territory. I want a hearin', an' I'm gonna have a hearin', an' you can stick a pin in that."

"Why don't yuh give him his hearin', Sheriff?" asked Bill Derr.

"Shore, give it to him," vociferously seconded the 88 boys and Mike Flynn.

"It ain't regular," hesitated the sheriff.

"Aw, what's the odds?" said Bill Derr. "Dolan's sober to-day, an' to-morrow's Sunday, an' Monday he'll be drunk. Give Red what he wants for once in his young life. He'll have long enough to stay in jail till the grand jury indicts him."

So it was settled, and Bert Kinzie went off to find Dolan, the storekeeper who was Justice of the Peace, the man who had signed the warrants for Red Kane and his brother. In the meantime Red, minus the handcuffs, was deposited in one of the calaboose cells. It was the very cell in which Ben Lenton had spent a few hours. He wondered how Ben was getting along — in the wild places beyond the Three Sisters. He smiled slowly and limbered up his cramped wrists. He thought of Dot Lenton and ceased to smile. She had been held in the jail, perhaps in this same cell. Her eyes had, it might be, looked through the grimy pane of the tiny window.

Her eyes — how they had used to sparkle. And a man

could look down into their dark depths for miles and miles and then not see that mysterious thing, the heart of a maid. To hear her say that she loved him, to kiss her on the mouth, he would have sold himself to the devil and damned his soul to hell everlasting and counted it a pleasure.

To please her he would have stolen, lied, killed, cheated at cards, or, for that matter, run through the entire list of deviltry eschewed by honest men without the slightest hesitation. That is how he loved her. Nearly all women and a few men love their beloveds like that. Red Kane was one of the few men.

And after all, even now she might not know her mind or, rather, her heart. Perhaps she did know it, and her answer would be negative. The state of being actually in jail was certainly spinning Red's imagination to the limit. He stared at the wall in dumb misery. At least he was spared the supreme agony. He was sure that there was no one else.

There was a sound of one stirring in the next cell. That would be Hudson. The man began to swear in low, dispassionate tones. Red's mouth stretched into a hard smile. He sincerely trusted that before the day's sun set John Hudson would have reason to swear with the heartiest abandon.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

THE HEARING

Came a sudden shuffling in the back room and the clack of conversation and the screaking and thumping of chairs being picked up and set down. The voice of one speaking loudly cut across the clatter, and the voice was that of Dolan.

"Might's well bring Red out, Sheriff," he was saying.

At one end of the room the floor rose in a jog a foot high. Upon this platform were a table and two chairs. Dolan occupied the chair behind the table. Red crossed the platform to the other chair, the wire-trussed chair at the end of the platform, and slumped down into it with his most chap-fallen air. It was no part of his plan to display confidence at first. Jake Rule took position beside Red — between him and the window.

Red looked furtively over the crowding audience. The place was packed. In the front row of spectators were Sheriff Tom Lumley and Deputy Billy Bruff. Surrounding this precious pair on three sides were Bill Derr, the four 88 boys, and peg-legged Mike Flynn. The Farewell friends of the Colorado men were as close to the latter as they could squeeze, but they could not jostle their way past Bill Derr and his partisans without a fight. And a fight was not to be thought of.

Behind the front line, wedged in among other of his friends, were Piney Jackson and that fleshy mountain, Bill Lainey. Red's conscience smote him somewhat for that he had been forced on the night of the jail-break to

knock Mr. Lainey cold. But what else could he have done? Circumstances had forced his hand or rather his fist. He grinned sheepishly at Bill and Piney and nodded.

Red's roving gaze did not at first pick up the long and slithy countenance of Mr. Bradley Usher. In a moment he located the money-lender's glossy black pate behind the broad Stetsons of two punchers from the Double Diamond A. Usher had removed his tall hat and was engaged in the ceremony of purveying himself a chew from the crown. Red was pleased to observe that Telescope Laguerre stood directly in the rear of Mr. Usher. This was as it should be.

"Say!" Justice Dolan cried irritably. "Whatsa matter with you, Red? I've done spoke to you four times. Come alive."

"Why, shore," Red said hastily. "I musta been thinkin' o' somethin' else."

"I guess you musta. Not that she makes no difference to me. Not a bit. I was just askin' yuh if yuh had anythin' partic'lar to say before I hold you for the grand jury. Seems like a plain open-an'-shut case, Red."

"Yeah," drawled Red. "Three witnesses ain't they — Lumley, Bruff an' Buck Saylor?"

"Yep."

Dolan nodded his head and polished the end of a red-veined nose.

"I don't see Buck Saylor anywhere," complained Red.

Ensued a commotion to the left of Mr. Usher, and Buck Saylor poked his head over the shoulder of a stage-station hostler.

"I'm right here," called Buck Saylor with what seemed unnecessary vehemence.

So was Tom Dowling of the Cross-in-a-box right there on Mr. Saylor's left hand. On the other side of the express agent loomed the tall form of Shorty Rumbold.

The woebegone, furtive manner fell as a cloak from

Red Kane. He sat up and shuffled his feet and rubbed his hands together with huge satisfaction and showed his teeth in a tremendous grin. He quite resembled an amiable wolf.

"This," he said clearly, "is somethin' like. Yes, indeedy. Judge, yore Honor, I'll begin at the beginnin', huh?"

"That's a good place to start," nodded Dolan. "I'll swear yuh first."

"Just a minute," cut in Tom Lumley. "They's a hold-up in the left-hand cell. Red Kane come out o' the other. I wanna know what's come o' Dot Lenton."

"You do, do yuh?" rapped out Jake Rule. "Well, don't you worry none about her. She's doin' right well where she is, an' where is just none o' yore business."

"I don't like this," Lumley exclaimed. "Somethin' shady goin' on. What you done with her, that's what I wanna know? What kind of a blazer you tryin' to run on me?"

"Where is she, Jake?" queried Dolan.

"In my house with my wife. I'm sheriff, an' I'm responsible for her. I don't need nobody to tell me how to take care o' my prisoners."

"Huh," snorted Tom Lumley.

"I meant you when I said 'nobody'," explained Sheriff Rule.

"I'll remember," purred Lumley, dropping an eyelid. "S'pose we sift along with our sewin'-circle."

"An' that'll be about all from you," struck in Dolan, cracking the table with the barrel of his six-shooter. "Red, the bridle's off. Hop to it. Here, wait a shake. Hold up yore right hand."

Red, having been duly sworn, crossed one leg over the other and pulled the makings from the upper right-hand pocket of his vest.

"Y'all remember, yore Honor an' gents," he began,

rolling the paper over the tobacco, "how fifty thousand dollars was stole out of the express office awhile ago."

"What's that gotta do with yore turnin' Ben Lenton loose!" struck in Lumley.

"I ain't in the habit o' speakin' twice," warned Dolan.

Lumley spat upon the floor. He said nothing aloud.

"Forty thousand dollars was for the new bank in Paradise Bend," continued Red, dwelling lovingly on the figures, "an' ten thousand was consigned to Lanpher of the 88. My li'l black hoss was stole at the same time along with my brother Tom's wagon an' his best team o' mules. We got the wagon an' mules back, but not the hoss — then.

"Li'l while later I picked up a knife with a busted blade an' a short bit wedged into her between the express office an' the company's corral. I pried out the short bit, an' scratched on her was the initials B L. The dime was bored near the edge, pocket piece like. The knife was marked B L, too."

Here Red took time to light his cigarette and inhale deeply.

"That same day," he went on, "Old Salt sat down on the bench outside the door of the express office. He leaned his shoulder against the jamb an' snags himself on a piece of a knife-blade stuck in the door jamb. I told Buck, an' he pulled her out with a pair o' pliers. Without Buck noticin', I fitted together the broken blade in the knife I found with the piece from the door jamb, an' they fitted fine. I didn't say nothin' about what I'd found — then."

"Why not?" asked Dolan.

"Wanted to find out more before springin' what I knowed," was Red's not too truthful reply. But it sounded sufficiently plausible.

"Yuh remember, yore Honor an' gents, how, when Lanpher tried to put off the robbery onto Ben Lenton, Pickles

Dill an' Spunk Lenn backed him up strong. You keep a-rememberin' that. It'll come in handy later.

"I was out at the Lenton place when Lanpher made his break. I'm sort of recoverin' from that riot when I lost the marked knife an' dime out o' my pocket. Young Sam Brown Calloway picks 'em up. The sheriff hears about it an' comes prancin' out, him an' Kansas, to see whether the knife-blade Buck pulled out of the office door-jamb fits or not.

"She didn't fit. The busted-off piece was part of a whole lot bigger knife. Now, yore Honor, that piece when Buck pulled her out of the doorway fitted fine. When the sheriff tried her at the Lenton ranch-house she didn't fit. The knife an' dime belonged to John Hudson, a gent who's wanted down in Lang County. Now, yore Honor, I'd like to know why Buck Saylor tried to shield John Hudson by substitutin' a different blade for the piece I found."

"I never did no such thing!" cried Buck Saylor hotly. "That blade —"

"What yuh so pale for then?" interrupted Red. "You look kind o' sick to me."

"Look here, Judge!" shouted Buck Saylor, "if this feller's accusin' me of anythin', I wanna know it. I want him to make a charge against me. This here beatin' round the bush don't go."

"I ain't beatin' round no bushes," contradicted Red. "I'm just statin' facts an' askin' question, thassall. Lordy, man alive, can't I ask a simple li'l question without Buck havin' a fit?"

"You've asked yore question," said the justice. "G'on."

"Might as well. Don't look like I was gonna get no answer."

"Yore Honor, this ain't got a thing to do with the charge against Red Kane," protested Buck violently.

"What he's sayin' is foolishness, an' it ain't gettin' nowhere."

"You only think it ain't gettin' nowhere, Buck," returned Red with the greatest good humor in the world. "You don't see the end of the trail yet, thassall. Lemme go at it my own way. I may be slow, but I'll get there at the finish, an', when I do, you'll be with me. Yessir, you'll be right along all same wheels on a wagon."

Red laughed loudly and leered at Buck Saylor. The express agent grunted, blew his nose, and coughed. He seemed to have a retching in the throat.

"You see, Buck," pursued the ruthless Mr. Kane, "I'm naturally interested in you. Yo're one of the gents swore out my warrant. Yo're a fly in the ointment. Feel sticky yet, Buck? Nemmine, you will."

"Stop it, Red," admonished the justice. "Keep a-travelin'."

"I will," nodded Red. "You know how Lumley, Billy Bruff an' Dunc Rouse come up here from Flipup, Colorado, to arrest Ben Lenton for the murder of his brother an' the stealin' o' thirty thousand of the brother's money. How'd they know he was here, huh? Who told 'em? Yore Honor, while I was sick at the Lenton ranch-house, a gent named Hollister stops for a meal there. Three days after that meal Hollister was in Blossom on the railroad sendin' a telegram to Sheriff Tom Lumley at Flipup, Colorado. The telegram says:

"Located L at K C ranch-house near Sweetwater Mountain east of Farewell.

"This telegram was signed H."

"Howja find this out?" asked Dolan.

"Operator at Blossom told me. I stopped there a few days ago. Whatsa matter, Lumley? Got a pain or somethin'? Nothin' serious, I hope. Shore, yore Honor, right away. Well, sir, them three fellers from Flipup gloms on to Ben Lenton, an' me'n Tom starts for Flipup

to find out the truth about that murder. Ben Lenton wasn't the man to kill his own brother, but Sheriff Tom Lumley an' them two deputies, Billy Bruff an' Dunc Rouse, was hell-roarers from way back. A li'l thing like murder wouldn't bother them none. I'd heard enough about them to be dead shore o' that.

"On our way south one night four riders passed without seein' us. One of em's hoss stumbled. He cussed, the man did. It was Hollister's voice. Farther south, over back of Scatterpine Ridge south of the Broken Hills, we heard a shot. Li'l later we seen Buck Saylor comin' through the woods. He didn't see us. Buck looked average nervous. We watched him get his hoss an' ride back out o' the woods to a li'l bunch o' cottonwoods at a spring. He stops there a shake lookin' at somethin' on the ground. Then he goes on. Bimeby, after he's good an' gone, we went out to the spring. There's Pickles Dill, a .45-90 through an' through him, dead as Julius Caesar. The front o' Pickles' shirt was all burnt. Whoever had killed him had held pretty close to Pickles. Looked like Pickles hadn't been expectin' it. Looked like Pickles musta been sort o' caught out on a limb."

"It's a lie!" boomed Buck Saylor, pale to his trembling lips.

"Own up now," urged Red, turning on Buck. "Wasn't Pickles the man killed yore bloodhounds? They was took away so's they wouldn't do no barkin' the night of the robbery, an' rather than be bothered feedin' em' out there at Squaw Draw an' afraid to leave 'em tied 'cause they might break loose an' take up the trail, Pickles downed 'em. Wasn't that the way of it, Buck?"

"You — you can't prove it," stuttered the badly-rattled express agent.

"I don't need to prove it. Yore face is too easy to read. It don't matter none anyway. She's only a detail. But the murder of Pickles is a cat with another tail. Me

an' Tom can prove that, you bet. An' I can get hold of Tom any time she's necessary."

"In this Territory," pronounced Judge Dolan with heavy emphasis, "they has to be two witnesses or satisfactory circumstantial evidence, or both, before a warrant can be issued on the charge of murder. I'll say right here the evidence so far is a heap satisfactory. Just as soon as this hearin' is over I'll issue a warrant for Buck Saylor. Pendin' the servin' of said warrant, the sheriff will take charge of Buck Saylor's person."

The sheriff left the platform and began to worm his way through the crowd toward Buck Saylor. The latter hesitated till he saw Jake Rule actually start in his direction; then he attempted to escape. He may have covered six inches of the distance to the door. But it is extremely doubtful. It was the gigantic Shorty Rumbold who pinioned his arms to his sides and held him fast, and it was Tom Dowling, of the Cross-in-a-box, who removed his six-shooter.

The sheriff snapped a pair of handcuffs upon the wrists of the madly protesting express agent, shoved him into the cell so lately vacated by Red Kane and locked the door.

This situation brought to a successful close, Red resumed his tale.

"We searched Pickles," said he, "an' we found in the leg of one boot two gold watches, in the other boot four hundred an' fifty dollars in gold. We all know Pickles Dill, yore Honor. Nobody never seen him work anythin' but his friends, an' he wasn't so lucky at cards. He never bought them gold watches, that's a cinch. We scouted round that camp, Tom an' me, an' we found the tracks of a pair of mighty small boots. Hollister wears small boots. We found the tracks of a hoss packin' a bar shoe on the near fore. Hollister rode a hoss like that. I seen Piney Jackson shoe him with a bar shoe myself.

"This wasn't all we found neither. She ain't five minutes after when my li'l black hoss — the one stolen out o' Tom's corral the night of the express robbery — my li'l black hoss, I say, come driftin' out of the woods close by. An' him an' the hoss of Pickles Dill was wearin' the same kind of figure-of-eight hobbles. This sort of links up Pickles an' Hollister on the express robbery. Yuh can see that easy.

"After that Tom an' me went on to Flipup, Colorado. One or two li'l things happened there had awful rough edges. We pulled through somehow, an' one evenin', when a hotel landlord named Skinner an' us was in the office of Bradley Usher, who came slidin' in but Hollister an' asks for Brad Usher, who's away at the time. I'm some took myself with Hollister's hair which was yaller last time I seen it an' black at the roots now. One thing led to another, an' we had to reason with Hollister. Durin' the argument an' while he was senseless, we looked him over, an' they's a knife scar on his right arm between shoulder an' elbow correspondin' to the scar carried by the much-wanted sport, John Hudson. Likewise he's packin' in his vest pocket the li'l carvin' of a Injun girl's head, which same head is a habit with Hudson seemin'ly. Bill Derr's got one Hudson carved, an' they was a larger one settin' on Brad Usher's desk. I was gonna bring it, but I couldn't find it when I come away."

"That's a lie," declared Usher coldly, speaking for the first time since the beginning of the hearing. "I never knowed anybody named Hollister or Hudson in my whole life. An' I never had no Injun head layin' round loose on my desk neither. Injun heads!"

"Well, now, I forgot," Red hastened to say. "I did find that Injun head, after all."

He pulled it from his vest pocket and held it up for all to see. From another pocket he produced a second head.

"Here's the one Hudson had in his own pocket when we caught him," Red hurried on, "an' here's Bill Derr's he just gimme. Yore Honor, look 'em over an' say what yuh think."

His Honor, after a close inspection, gave it as his opinion that the same hand and knife had carved the three.

"All this don't tangle me anywhere," said Usher, "if that's what yo're gettin' at, Mister Man."

"That's what I'm gettin' at," replied Red. "'Li'l by li'l ties the knot' as the Vigilantes used to say."

Lumley and Bruff glanced uneasily at each other. This Territorial court of law was a farce — so far. The Lord knew when it would twist into a tragedy.

"I forgot to say," said Red, "that we found in Hudson's pocket the watch of the Governor of this Territory — the one stole from him in the holdup near town. Here's the watch. They's a inscription inside the case. Lookit, Judge, read her off for yourself. So yuh see, yore Honor an' gents, here's Hudson gettin' his feet wet an' splashin' Brad Usher at the same time. Yo're shore you don't know a gent named Hudson or Hollister, huh, Usher?"

"No, I don't," was the loudly uttered reply.

"Sheriff, how about now?" queried Red.

Jake Rule nodded and strode to the door of the left-hand cell, which he unlocked. A moment later John Hudson, alias Hollister, disheveled, defiant and sullen, stumbled out upon the platform.

"Did yuh ever see this feller before, Mr. Usher?" called the Judge, indicating the prisoner.

"Am I bein' examined?" asked Bradley Usher.

"Not a-tall. I'm just askin' questions. Nothin' regular about this. But you either know this feller or you don't. If you don't answer, you must have a reason for not answerin'. Maybe that reason would be interestin' for to know."

Judge Dolan licked his lips and squinted at Mr. Usher. The latter's face was expressionless. Then — "I don't know him," said Mr. Usher. "Never seen him in all my life."

"Lemme make you acquainted then," struck in Red. "This is John Hudson, alias Hollister, the gent who was askin' for yuh that night in yore office at Flipup. You don't know him, an' alla time you was keepin' this here new hydraulic peroxide in stock for him an' usin' one of his Injun girl heads for a paper weight. You don't know him, huh? That's funny. An' it don't tangle you anywhere, huh? That's funnier. An' what's comin' next is gonna be funniest.

"Yore Honor," went on Red, turning to Judge Dolan, "me an' Tom kept right along tryin' to cut out our own particular cow, an' by an' by we got the true story of what happened at the Empire Mine the day Dick Lenton, Ben Lenton's brother, was murdered.

"Usher, Bruff, Lumley an' Rouse bought the mine for sixty thousand dollars. Usher an' Lumley an' Rouse — Bruff didn't go — Hudson an' Art Teller an' Skinner went out to the mine the mornin' after Ben Lenton an' his daughter left. . . . Huh? Shore. This Hudson was a kind of go-between for Brad Usher an' — an' whatever Brad happened to be interested in round the country. Nobody knowed him in Flipup — he always come in an' juked out in the night — except Usher an' six of his friends. An', speakin' of friends, we found out that Hudson knowed Rum Durkin an' Spunk Lenn back east in Chadron, Nebraska, where they all three broke jail together just in time to miss bein' lynched for hoss-stealin'. Where was I at? Oh, yeah, Usher an' five of his friends went out to the mine, an' they got there early, an' they's nobody there but Dick Lenton, an' he's drunk. He showed 'em the money where she's hid in the stove, an' between 'em they figured to rub him out, take the thirty

thousand, put all the blame on Ben Lenton an' get his thirty thousand too.

"They drawed lots to see who'd do the shootin', an' Hudson lost. He gave Dick Lenton both barrels of Dick's own shotgun, but he didn't quite finish him; so Brad Usher an' Tom Lumley pulled their six-shooters, an' Dick died right quick."

Red sprang to his feet and pointed at Lumley.

"Look at him, yore Honor!" he shouted. "Don't he look like a guilty man?"

Lumley, beside himself with badly mixed emotions, volleyed back denials, general and particular.

"You think I can't prove it?" interrupted Red at the top of his lungs. "Look!"

Red half turned as he spoke and jerked a thumb toward the open window behind him. Framed in the window appeared the handcuffed form of Art Teller, Kansas Casey in close attendance.

"He's a liar!" shrieked Tom Lumley. "I never fired a shot! I never even drawed my gun! It was Hudson an' Usher who killed Dick Lenton! I — I tried to stop em! I tried to stop 'em! I tell yuh I didn't have a thing to do with it!"

Instantly, led by Bill Derr and the 88 boys, a rush of men bore Lumley and Bruff to the floor where they were sat upon and deprived of their weapons.

It was then that John Hudson with a sudden roar of rage sprang from the platform and strove to brain Tom Lumley with his handcuffs. But Bill Derr was a watchful person, particularly so at that moment, and Lumley escaped with the mere trifle of a gashed cheek.

Toward the rear of the room Telescope Laguerre was pressing the muzzle of a six-shooter against the small of Bradley Usher's back.

"Don' you move," Telescope was saying. "You keep you' hand up or I blow you een half mebbeso. W'ere

dat gun, *hein?* I fin' it, me. Now walk slow up front de room. Move!"

"Look here, Judge," said Usher when he had been forced to the platform, "you can't hold us for a crime alleged to have been committed in another state. I want a lawyer."

"We ain't got a lawyer in town," said Judge Dolan. "So that's all right. An' I'll hold yuh as vagabonds till Colorado gets out the warrants for yuh. So that's all right too."

"You ain't got nothin' against me," spoke up Billy Bruff desperately. "Even if you hold these other fellers, I ain't in it with them. Kane here said I didn't go out to the mine that mornin'. Holdin' me is a heap illegal."

"Yeah," said Red. "You think so. Wait till yo're shaved o' that beard an' see if Piney Jackson don't recognize yuh. He was a horseshoer in yore regiment when it was stationed at Fort Rackham, where Miss Lenton said you deserted after the post-trader's killin', you bein' at the time a sergeant named Reynolds. Yeah, Piney Jackson. He's the blacksmith here in Farewell. You've seen him — he's right yonder now — an' I guess you must know him by the way yore eyes are battin'. We'll just see if he knows you."

"Whatsa use waitin' to shave him?" objected Piney. "I got my hoss-clippers right in my pocket."

Billy Bruff was not kept waiting. Ten minutes later he was identified as the army deserter Reynolds, the man suspected of having murdered the post-trader, by the willing Piney.

"I guess that settles you," said Judge Dolan in a loud voice. "Sheriff, app'int some deputies an' take all these prisoners down to the express office. I wanna do some investigatin'. No, nemmine Red Kane. He ain't no prisoner. I ain't even askin' him to deny the charge against him. 'Tain't necessary, since he's showed up the fellers

who swore out the warrants the way he has. Affidavits an' warrants swore to an' swore out by murderers, road agents an' army deserters don't travel a foot in this court, an' the warrants against Red Kane, his brother Tom, an' Miss Dorothy Lenton are hereby quashed. Sheriff, go right along with yore duty."

"You Teller!" Hudson, grinding his handcuffs together in an ecstasy of rage, snarled through clenched teeth, "I'll get you before I die, an' get you a-plenty, you lousy snitch!"

The manacled gentleman at the open window tilted his wizened face on one side and surveyed the glaring Hudson with contempt.

"Don't lemme see you first," was his sole remark.

"Aw, you needn't be bad friends with Art Teller, Hudson," deprecated Red. "Outside of bein' a murderer he's all right. He ain't no snitch. But I knowed he knowed all about this business, an' I just lied a li'l bit when he showed up there at the window so fine and providential. Naw, you gotta blame Sheriff Tom Lumley for bein' took in an' losin' his head an' blattin' out thataway, an' likewise Skinner for confessin', besides the shotgun you killed Dick Lenton with for leadin' us straight to Skinner after we thought we'd lost him for good an' all. Yep, the shotgun with Dick Lenton's initials cut into the small o' the stock. You'd oughta destroyed that shotgun instead of givin' it to Bill Doran to play with. That was careless."

Hudson burst into a flood of vile and filthy oaths. He continued to swear as the impatient sheriff propelled him toward the door.

Noisily the crowd and the prisoners trooped from the building. Oddly enough, the sheriff did not take the captives to the express office. He locked them up in Judge Dolan's warehouse and set three men on guard. Which being done, the sheriff joined Red Kane, Judge Dolan,

Bill Derr and other prominent personages at the bar of the Happy Heart.

An hour later Red, the Judge, Derr and the sheriff returned to the jail. Jake Rule unlocked the door of Buck Saylor's cell.

"Lookit here," said Red roughly, confronting Buck Saylor. "Them other fellers say you kept back half o' that fifty thousand for yore share. What did you do with it?"

"Half!" screamed the overwrought express agent. "Half! Ten thousand was all I got. They — My Gawd — I — What you talkin' about? I don't know nothin' about it, I tell you!"

"I guess you've said enough," nodded Red. "Have I done my part o' the bargain satisfactory, Sheriff?"

"Which I should say so!" was the hearty response. "I'll send word down to Flipup right away, an' the old man can come back any time."

From the jail Red went directly to the sheriff's house. Plump Mrs. Rule, wiping her hands on her apron, said in response to his inquiry that Miss Lenton had departed homeward.

"Jake sent Kansas to tell her the warrant was squashed," Mrs. Rule told him, "an' Dot, she left immediate. A real nice girl, that one. I declare I was glad to have her, so handy an' neat an' obligin'. Know her well, Mr. Kane?"

"Not very well. Didn't she leave no message for me?"

"Nary a word."

Mrs. Rule folded her arms across her substantial bosom and beamed upon him fatuously.

"No word — nothin' a-tall?" Incredulously.

The sheriff's wife shook her tight, slick coiffure. Red took his instant leave without even a nod for politeness.

Dot gone without a word! He couldn't understand it.

She must have known he was in town. Kansas would have told her, or Mrs. Rule, or even Jake himself. What did it mean? Was it to be the wrong answer after all?

There was only one way to find out — follow. He went to Tom's corral, whither his horse had been taken, caught up the animal and hurriedly cinched on the hull.

But he did not immediately head toward the ranch-house at Sweetwater Mountain. Instead, he rode north along the Bend trail a short two miles. Below a sway-backed ridge he halted, dragged out his six-shooter and fired five shots. He was engaged in the process of reloading when Tom Kane loped out of an adjacent draw.

"It's all right," said Red listlessly. "I — we won, an' the warrants are squashed."

"Oh, you won," said Tom. "Yo're welcome to the credit. You worked hard enough for it. Say, I seen Rooster Cox larrupin' along about two hours ago. He was headin' north. I didn't stop him."

Red nodded.

"I didn't see him at the hearin'," he said. "He musta smelt a mice some'ers. Can't prove nothin' against him, but I expect he ain't so sure about that himself."

"I expect he ain't," chuckled Tom. "An' that'll be the last of him an' his outfit round here, anyway. What yuh lookin' so sad for, huh?"

"Who? Me? Me sad? Why —"

"Yeah, you. Which yore face is as long as a well-rope. An' look — Say, has she give yuh the *klatawah?* Has she? Did she turn yuh down, huh? Did she?" The liveliest hope was depicted upon the countenance of Tom Kane.

"If I only had a button, I could fasten that grin of yores right behind yore ears," said Red, forcing a hard smile. "You look like a catfish."

"I'll bet she's gave yuh the mitten," persisted Tom, "an' serve you good an' right for bein' a fool. Yo're

well out of it. Just lookit what's happened because you went an' fell in love with that nester's girl! Just lookit all the trouble we horned into! You an' I was lucky not to be lynched. An' all on account of her an' her black eyes! I tell yuh, bad luck with a big B! Yo're well out of it, yuh bet yuh."

"I ain't asked her yet," Red said dully, "if yuh gotta know. I'm ridin' out to the K C now."

"You are! Well, if you can't see the quicksand after all that's happened, ride into it, cowboy, ride into it hell-bent! I give up. I ain't got a word to say. Not a word. I've done scratched my head till she's raw, tryin' to figger some way o' gittin' you out o' this. I spent one whole afternoon the day I come to see you at the K C after you was shot a-settin' on a rock a-wrastlin' an' a-puzzlin' to snoozle out a path for yuh — I've shore studied a heap, an' it ain't done a bit o' good. I've talked till I'm dry as a covered bridge, an' yo're still as sheep-foolish as ever. You'll wish you hadn't, you hear me warblin'! An' a year from now you'll be fightin' like wolves."

Red laid a long finger alongside his nose.

"Har!" said he. "An' again har, har! An' three times har, har, har! Which bein' translated into words of one syllable means the more I see of you the better I like myself. Now you drift along into Farewell, Tommy, old settler, an' get yore freightin' business a-goin' again. If I'm gonna be yore partner, I'm all for activity an' makin' money an' pushin' the bridge over generally. So long."

With a loud whoop Red smacked his hat across the astonished eyes of Tom's pony, wheeled his horse in a quarter-circle and galloped off eastward.

Tom, when he had his mount again under control, looked at Red vanishing down the draw, and added a few chosen words to those he had been passionately uttering

during the gyrations of his pony. Then he smiled sourly and rolled a cigarette.

"Alla same," he said aloud in the general direction of his horse's ears, "alla same, he's one good worker. An' she won't spoil that."

When Red reached the ranch-house under Sweetwater the kitchen door stood wide open, and from the chimney pennoned a wisp of smoke.

He dismounted heavily, dropped the reins over his horse's head and walked slowly to the doorway. He stood there, his hat in his hand, looking in. No one was in the room, but a pot of coffee, roosting low on the fire, protruded six inches above lid-level. The kitchen table was set for two. He looked long at that table. His mind was a tangle of doubt and conjecture. He shifted his feet and passed a hand across the back of his head.

"You — you might as well come in."

It was Dot Lenton speaking from the doorway of the inner room.

He stepped over the sill, wondering why she should boggle her invitation. It wasn't like her. She was a direct sort of person. He looked at her standing there, at the fugitive smile that left her red mouth grave, at the dark eyes deep as the wells of night, and his heart hopped right up into his mouth and stayed there fighting for existence with his Adam's apple. But all he could think of to say was —

"You didn't leave me no word."

The fugitive smile returned on the instant.

"Was it so necessary?" she asked softly, and a slow flush reddened the tan of throat and cheeks.

At once that old K C kitchen underwent a most marvelous change. There were birds there, scores of them, and they were all singing as if their little throats would burst. And there was a light too, a wonderful golden light that filled every nook and cranny.

Red dropped his hat on the floor and drew a long breath.

"Have you found out yet?" he asked, his eyes on hers.

"Wait," she said and came forward into the kitchen.

Her cantina hung over a chair-back. She jerked open the flap, inserted her hand and pulled out a flat, limp package wrapped in a newspaper and tied with the blue string affected by the Blue Pigeon Store. She laid this package on the table between the places she had set.

"Red," she said, facing him across the table, "before I answer your question I want to — to — tut-tell you somethin' and show you somethin'. I — I was a beast, Red, when I said what I did."

"Huh?"

He gaped at her. A beast! What was the girl talking about? A pucker of alarm creased his forehead.

"A beast," she repeated, "a nasty, little, swell-headed, self-sufficient little beast."

Red stared at her helplessly. She seemed sane enough, but what was she talking about?

With a snap of her thumb she broke the blue string that bound the package. She snicked open the newspaper and revealed a brand-new shirt of gray flannel plentifully besprinkled with aggressive purple horseshoes. On top of the shirt lay a folded silk handkerchief of a strikingly vivid green. He regarded the shirt. He regarded the handkerchief. Then he looked at her. Still he did not understand.

"Red," she said, meeting his gaze bravely, "I spoiled your gray shirt when I washed it, and the horseshoes all ran and faded out, and I took away your green handkerchief, and I — I said things to you about them — things I shouldn't have said about what didn't matter, anyway. So here's another gray shirt, Red, like your old one, and another handkerchief like the one I took. I — I think

they're the — the shirt's the right size. Mister Flynn said it was, and he ordered it special from Piegan City. I — I think a green handkerchief tied round the neck of a gray shirt with purple horseshoes mummakes the most bub-beautiful combination in the world, and very becomin' to a man with red hair."

And then the table was no longer between them.

. . . . . .

"I think the coffee's scorchin'."

Dot Lenton stirred briefly and sniffed the air.

"Is it? What do you care?"

"I don't — much." Comfortably.

. . . . . .

"My goodness, Red, look at the sun. We — we've been sittin' here all afternoon."

"You just notice it? I s'pose we'd oughta be goin'. Dolan goes to bed early, an' we don't wanna roust him out too late."

"Dolan?"

"Shore, Dolan the judge. He marries folks. He's gonna marry you an' me. Now, that's all right. I'm doin' this. Day after to-morrow's the twentieth. I gotta go down to Triangle Mountain to light that smoke for yore dad, ain't I? You don't think I'm goin' alone, do yuh? Well, then."

THE END